

SCOTPRESS

GSAZARA



A
STAR TREK
FANZINE

Alinda

Alain

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by

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GSAZARA

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Relief Navigator Alden lay bleeding and broken on the floor of his quarters. With an effort of will, his mind found its way back to consciousness - cautiously. *Carefully now. Careful*, Alden warned himself. *Make sure IT isn't still waiting to attack again. Patient... I must be patient...* Yet Alden sensed that the longer he delayed the more time it gave the malignant entity to find the Captain.

Gathering his courage and ignoring the terrible pain every movement evoked, the Navigator dragged himself towards the intercom. *I must warn the Captain. Alert the ship. Call Security - protect the Captain!*

Broken, bloodied fingers reached up, hit the intercom switch. "Help..." he called feebly. "Help... Captain! Help..."

* * * * *

The intercom buzzer brought James Kirk quickly awake.

"Kirk here," he muttered, still sleepily, activating the com switch.

"Jim - this is McCoy. I need you in Sickbay right away."

Kirk sat up, instantly fully awake, a cold chill running down his spine. "What is it? What's wrong, Bones? Spock?..."

"No. It's Lloyd Alden. He's been attacked in his cabin."

Attacked? What did that mean?

"On my way, Bones." Kirk rolled out of bed, made one call then dressed quickly, splashed water on his face and ran a quick comb through his hair.

As he reached the door, it slid aside to reveal the tall lanky form of his Vulcan First Officer.

"Spock." Kirk was surprised - and relieved - to see his friend.

"Is something wrong, Jim?" Spock's dark eyes examined him, reflecting just a hint of worry.

"Yes. There's some kind of trouble. Bones wants me in Sickbay. He said Lt. Alden had been 'attacked'." Kirk was hurrying towards the turbolift as he spoke. The Vulcan fell into step beside him.

"Attacked?" Although Spock lifted a slanted eyebrow, inwardly the Vulcan had relaxed. He had been in deep meditation before his firepot when a strong wave of emotional upheaval had jarred the mental bond which had developed between him and Kirk during the years

of their service together. Alarmed, he had come at once to check on his Captain.

"Yes, 'attacked'. I've no idea exactly what he means by that. By his tone, it was not something he wanted to expound on over the intercom. And if there had been a fight among members of the crew in which Alden was injured, Bones would have said so, even if Alden had tried to cover up who was responsible." Kirk's voice tailed off, uneasiness returning to chill him.

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "A most unusual phrasing."

"It sounds as though we may have an intruder aboard," Kirk continued. "I've alerted Security. Chief Giotto will meet us in Sickbay."

* * * * *

McCoy looked up from his desk as Kirk, Spock and Security Chief Giotto entered his office. "Come in, gentlemen," he said unnecessarily. His tone was grim.

"What happened, Bones?" Kirk demanded.

"Lloyd Alden was almost beaten to death in his cabin an hour or so ago. He has severe internal injuries and there is every indication that he has been... physically assaulted."

Kirk frowned. "Assaulted?" McCoy's use of the word after specifying 'beaten' seemed strange.

"If Alden was a woman, it would be called rape," McCoy clarified, somewhat surprised to find in himself a deep-seated prejudice at using that term in reference to an attack on a man; even though he knew such things did happen, that part of the male ego which always insisted on being in control of its environment urged him to call the attack anything else but rape. And by the expressions on the faces of Kirk, McCoy and Giotto, the Doctor saw that they were as inclined to be as disbelieving as he.

"Who...?" The Captain faltered, took a moment to assimilate this unexpected piece of information, then continued. "Who did this?"

"He didn't know, Jim. He's not covering for anyone, either. From the little I was able to understand before he went into a coma, he was asleep in bed one minute and then the next thing he knew somebody was suffocating him. He struggled, but lost consciousness from lack of oxygen. When he became aware again, it was to find himself alone and in terrible pain. He crawled to the intercom and called for help."

"Have you checked his record? Does he have any enemies aboard the ship? Someone he doesn't get along with? A... lover he might have quarrelled with?"

"None that the computer, my records, or his immediate friends are aware of."

Kirk looked to Giotto, who nodded.

"I'll get my people on this right away, sir." The Security Chief started to leave.

"Jim - we need to take this slowly," McCoy interjected. "We have to investigate this affair as quietly as possible."

"What?!" Kirk was startled, and not a little angry, that something like this should happen on the Enterprise.

"Jim, all I'm trying to say is that we just can't broadcast to the entire ship that a man's been... raped."

"Doctor, if we have a rapist aboard this ship - someone who is capable of engaging in sexual activity with a person against their will - I want him found and confined." The Captain was furious and completely outraged at the thought that any member of his crew could do this to another.

"I fully agree, Captain. I'm just suggesting that we be careful how we speak of this," McCoy implored. "We don't want to create unnecessary panic or accusations."

Kirk took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. "You're right, Bones. O.K." He addressed the Security Chief. "Mr. Giotto, inform your people that a crewman was severely beaten by a person or persons unknown - possibly a stowaway or an intruder." Unlikely as that possibility was, the Captain fervently hoped that it was an outsider and not someone under his command. "Even so question everyone, Chief. Tell your people to be discreet but *thorough*. Find out who did this!"

"Yes, Captain." Giotto left. Kirk turned back to face his two friends.

For a long moment there was silence between them.

"This feels terribly wrong. I can't believe it. A member of my crew just can't be responsible for this kind of behaviour!... Is there anyone who's been aboard less than a year?"

"Jim - we can't always catch every person's aberrations. Nor can we predict or anticipate all the factors which might stimulate a normal healthy personality to go berserk all of a sudden. This is especially true in our line of work. What with all the unknowns a Starship's crew encounters - alien chemicals, spores of alien plants... Take the three of us. Each of us has been known to act out of character when affected by some new alien experience. Yes, you too, Jim; you committed several anti-social acts when your personality was split in two."

The Captain stiffened, not liking to be reminded of the incident in which his 'wolf' side had attacked his then yeoman, Janice Rand.

McCoy went on relentlessly. "Under the influence of those one-celled creatures on Deneva, Spock tried to take over the ship and land it on the planet. Scotty, Sulu and I each tried to kill you and Spock on Pyris VII while we were under the mental control of the aliens who called themselves Sylvia and Korob. Then there was the time when Chekov attacked the Klingon woman Mara - "

"All right, Doctor. I get your point. I'll try to be as understanding as possible. But we have to catch the culprit first."

McCoy relaxed. "Of course, Captain."

But the Captain's mood did not lighten. Instead, he went to



take a look at the comatose Lloyd Alden. Spock moved to follow, but paused to glance back at McCoy.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Spock?"

"You will have someone with you here in Sickbay at all times?" Although it was a question, the Vulcan's tone also held a hint of command which puzzled McCoy for a second. Then -

"Of course, Spock. I'll be fine." The Doctor's blue eyes reflected the warmth the Human felt at realising the Vulcan's concern for him. "And you'd better keep an eye on our Captain."

For the merest fraction of a second, there was an answering warmth reflected in the dark, deepset eyes. Then the Vulcan inclined his head briefly and went to join Jim Kirk.

* * * * *

Hours later - about mid-morning, ship's time - a frustrated Jim Kirk paused in his pacing of his quarters to address his First Officer.

"Spock, why don't you go and meditate or something? There's no need for you to sit here and suffer my foul mood."

"Captain, I too am deeply disturbed by the knowledge that a person capable of such an anti-social act is moving freely about the Enterprise," the Vulcan pointed out. It occurred to Spock even as he spoke that neither Kirk nor any other Human male on the ship was likely to think of himself as a possible target for a rapist, nor was he likely to take kindly to the suggestion that he might indeed be such a target. The First Officer of the Enterprise determined to make it his personal responsibility to keep a watchful eye on certain Humans until the guilty party was found and confined.

The intercom buzzed. Kirk walked over and answered it.

It was McCoy.

"Alden didn't make it, Jim. The internal injuries were too severe."

Kirk drew a ragged breath. "All right, Doctor." His tone was subdued as he accepted the report.

"Captain - "

"I'm all right, Bones. Kirk out." He switched off and leaned against the desk.

"Captain..." Spock's concern echoed McCoy's.

Kirk did not look up. "We've lost our witness. And... I've lost a member of my crew... again."

"I know." The Vulcan rose from the chair to stand at Kirk's side, offering silent support.

* * * * *

The next two weeks passed uneventfully aboard the silver Starship. The Enterprise crew, having lost one of its members to mysterious circumstances, returned cautiously to the daily routine. Kirk nevertheless kept the ship on yellow alert. The medical staff, using the excuse of a computer malfunction which supposedly had erased the last psychological tests made on the crew, began to redo the psych profiles of all personnel. Giotto and his department continued their efforts to find some clue as to who had committed the rape and murder.

But - were it not for Alden's battered, lifeless body in the ship's morgue - the incident might never have happened.

* * * * *

At the beginning to the third week and prompted by McCoy's urgings, Jim Kirk decided to make an effort to relax.

"Mr. Spock." Kirk's tone was casual as he addressed the Vulcan who sat across the table from him. They were in the mess, having lunch together. In fact, the First Officer had been going out of his way, it seemed, to find reasons to be with him these last two weeks. "I've got a little get-together planned for tonight with Lt. Teresa Ross, who will be leaving the ship for her new planetside posting on Starbase 11. I would appreciate it if you make sure that I have no interruptions for the rest of the evening."

"Of course, Captain." The Vulcan's manner was formal, almost stiff. Resignation settled about the slim form like a cloak.

The Captain's hazel eyes twinkled with amusement. "Spock - I've been wound up for almost two weeks over this thing with Alden. I need to relax. I need a diversion a bit more... involved... than our chess games or the workouts in the gym." Even as he spoke he could sense his friend's disapproval.

"Captain, you need not explain your actions to me. I am quite accustomed to Humans' illogical, emotionally-evoked behaviour patterns."

"I don't doubt that. I just wish you didn't disapprove of us so much."

The Vulcan contrived to look annoyed. "I do not disapprove of you."

Kirk smiled. "Nevertheless, you wish that I were a little less... active... in my private life." It was not a question.

The dark eyes looked at him for a long moment. "All I wish for you, Jim Kirk, is happiness," the Vulcan intoned solemnly.

Kirk sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. You are a good friend. I wish you, too, happiness."

For the rest of the meal, the two sat in companionable silence.

* * * * *

The Captain's effort to relax and forget the spectre of death - which was soon to overshadow his beloved ship and crew once more - was destined never to materialise. He and Ms. Ross had just begun

their cozy, intimate evening alone together when his cabin's intercom buzzed urgently for attention.

With an apologetic look at Teresa, he answered, "Kirk here." His tone did not quite say *This had better be good* - officially or unofficially, everyone knew that he had not wanted to be disturbed that evening, so he knew that for anyone to do so it must be serious.

"Jim - it's happened again." McCoy's voice held overtones of shock and dismay.

Kirk groaned, all the energy and enthusiasm draining out of his body. *Oh, God. Not again!* Then, aloud, "Who?"

"Lt. Andrea Smith. Same symptoms and situation - except that she didn't make it to Sickbay before I lost her. I've alerted Giotto," the Doctor added. The strain in the physician's voice was evident.

Kirk started to offer some words of support, but was distracted by a cry of dismay from Teresa Ross. He stared at her for a moment, barely able to comprehend the blonde woman's total distress and flood of tears, until he recalled that Teresa and the dead Andrea had been room-mates.

"We'll be down in ten minutes, Bones," the Captain told the Doctor. Switching off the intercom, he went to comfort the woman.

* * * * *

They found Spock waiting for them near the turbolift.

"I see that McCoy called you, too," the Captain commented by way of acknowledging his First Officer. The Vulcan made no reply but followed the Humans into the turbolift.

As it began to move, Kirk placed an arm about Teresa in an effort to soothe and calm her further. The woman was bordering on hysteria. She was aware that had she not been with the Captain, she might have shared her room-mate's fate.

Minutes later, the three walked into McCoy's office. The Doctor looked up, switching off the viewer.

"Giotto and the others are in the next room waiting for you," he told the men.

"What others?" Kirk asked.

"Andrea was in the company of Sulu, Chekov and Tamara Lee earlier this evening. About an hour ago the four went their separate ways. They dropped Andrea off first, and en route to their quarters the other three changed their plans for tomorrow night. When she got to her cabin, Tamara tried to call Andrea in order to tell her of the change. When the intercom unit activated, it was to the sound of Andrea's screams." McCoy gave a quick summary of events. "You can hear the rest of the story from her." He was eyeing Teresa Ross worriedly.

Noting McCoy's look, Kirk placed Ross in the Doctor's care. Then he and Spock went into the next room to learn of the night's unpleasant events first hand.

* * * * *

"I heard Andrea screaming..." Lt. Lee recounted. "There was a sizzling sound, like something being quick-frozen. I called Security and rushed back to her cabin. When I arrived, I found her crumpled on the floor, beaten, bloodied... her room was in a shambles."

"But no sign of the intruder?" Kirk was frustrated.

"None."

Kirk looked to the Security detail. The men shrugged, shaking their heads. They had found nothing.

* * * * *

Two hours later, the two returned to McCoy's office. By the expression on Kirk's face, the Doctor discerned that the questioning had brought no answers.

As they entered, Spock was giving a summary of the situation as he perceived it.

"Both attacks occurred in the victim's quarters when they were alone. There is no indication of forced entry into either cabin. Except for the physical condition of the victims and their living quarters, there is no evidence whatsoever of the intruder. Sickbay reports no member of the crew with a mental profile capable of such actions. Finally, the attacker - if only one - is incredibly strong, since he or it has overpowered and killed two well-trained Starfleet officers who - even if taken by surprise - would certainly fight back."

"Bones." Kirk addressed McCoy. "Run a comparison check on Alden and Smith. See if the computer can come up with anything they might have... might have had... in common."

"Right away, Jim."

"Spock will assist. And, Doctor - " Kirk looked at the physician - "I'm not delaying the announcement any longer. The crew has to know we have a killer among us. One who may be known to them. One who is attacking both men and women."

McCoy nodded his agreement, no longer in the mood to voice any objections.

The Captain walked over to the desk, contacted the bridge, requesting ship-wide audio.

I should have done this right after Alden's death, he reproved himself silently. But no, he had decided to treat the attack on Alden as the work of an outsider so as to make McCoy's psych-profile check less accusative. Perhaps if I'd alerted my people to the possibility that one of them might be a psychopathic killer, Andrea Smith would still be alive.

* * * * *

Another two weeks passed, during which the crew searched the ship from top to bottom. McCoy and the medical staff continued checking the psych-profiles of each crew member. And as an extra precaution, Kirk ordered that no-one be alone for any prolonged

period of time and that each person have within easy calling distance at least two other people.

Displaying the 'family spirit' common among the crew of the Enterprise, friends began forming groups and making schedules in order to look out for each other.

* * * * *

First Officer Spock and Security Lieutenant D'Lorraine Larsen were returning from escort duty to McCoy and Chapel when they heard screams coming from the staff lounge frequented by the junior officers. The two rushed towards the sounds, phasers drawn. Entering the lounge, they stopped to stare, momentarily baffled. Chief Helmsman Sulu was on the floor, thrashing and kicking and yelling as if he had lost his mind. Chekov and Kyle, who were Sulu's escort companions, lay unconscious against the wall. Their bodies were sprawled among toppled tables and chairs as if the men had been carelessly picked up and thrown there.

"What the..." Larsen exclaimed.

"The intruder!" Spock discerned, activating his phaser to sweep the room. "It is invisible. Some form of psychic energy. Hos - "

But before the Vulcan could fire, a powerful force hit him, causing him to fall backwards and drop his phaser. A crushing pressure encircled his chest and began to squeeze. His uniform began to disintegrate as if it was being ripped to shreds by unseen claws. At that moment also, a malignant mental force slammed into his mind.

Spock screamed.

Then the hum of a phaser filled the room, its stunning power enveloping the First Officer, who crumpled into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Larsen sagged against the wall, taking great gulps of air. "Oh, God," she whispered in a fearful prayer. "I hope I didn't kill them!"

Pushing herself away from the wall, Larsen knelt to examine Spock. A ragged breath of relief escaped her - the Vulcan was alive. Quickly she moved about the room examining the other three men. All four were deeply unconscious and looked as if they'd been in a vicious bar-room brawl. Of them all, Sulu was in the worst shape, barely breathing.

Hurrying to the wall intercom, the Security Lieutenant called for medical and backup teams. Then she waited, leaning her forehead against the wall.

A moan sounded behind her. Straightening quickly she looked around to see the First Officer stirring.

"Mr. Spock!" She went and knelt beside him, marvelling at his stamina. Not too many people could fight their way back to consciousness so soon after a full phaser stun.

"Jim..." the Vulcan groaned.

"I'm sure the Captain is on his way, sir," Larsen assured.

"Lieutenant?" Spock tried to lift his head, to open his eyes and move his hands but his mind seemed oddly disconnected from his body.

"I'm here, sir. Take it easy. Help is on the way." Larsen placed her hand on his shoulder, holding him still without much trouble since his efforts at movement were feeble and uncoordinated.

"The entity?"

"Gone. I swept the room with the phaser," she told him. "It went away. What was it? Do you know?"

"Incorporeal energy... no form... no mass. Pure energy and power. Malignant," Spock muttered, consciousness beginning to slip from him again.

At that moment, McCoy and the medical teams arrived, followed almost immediately by the Captain and Giotto.

"Spock!" Kirk rushed to his First Officer's side. Dropping to his knees, he reached to touch the Vulcan's battered face. "Spock...!"

"Jim, move aside," McCoy ordered, needing to examine the Vulcan. He spoke roughly, but the concern in his blue eyes matched the distress in Kirk's hazel ones.

Reluctant but obedient, the Captain moved away. Rising, he looked towards Sulu and the others. "Are they alive?" he enquired.

"Yes," Chapel answered, "but Mr. Sulu is critical. We have to get him to surgery right away if we are to have any hope of saving him."

"Go," Kirk ordered, realising belatedly that his concern was delaying everyone. But the medical team required no urging. Chapel and her team were already on their way out.

Turning back to Spock, Kirk saw that McCoy and his team were on the move also with the Vulcan.

"Bones?"

"I'll let you know," the Doctor promised.

The Captain watched as the last two teams placed Chekov and Kyle on med-transports. As they moved past, he finally turned to Larsen. For a moment he contemplated accusing her of deserting her crewmates during a dangerous situation, until he noticed that her tunic and pants were torn and that her long blonde hair, normally kept up in a tight bun, was hanging raggedly about her face and shoulders. Also there were no traces of guilt in the ice-blue eyes, merely frustration and exhaustion.

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

"Mr. Spock and I were returning from escorting Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel to Sickbay..." Larsen went on to recount what had occurred. When she made the observation of the intruder's characteristics, Kirk interrupted.

"Did you say it was invisible?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Spock tried to make a general sweep of the room with his phaser but was attacked before he could act. He yelled something about 'malignant mental energy', screamed, and collapsed. His clothes and flesh began to disintegrate, so I did what he had attempted. I swept the whole area with phaser fire and the intruder ceased its attack."

Kirk took a deep breath. "So the attacker is an alien; an intruder," he murmured. Relief washed through him as he finally knew that none of his crew had been responsible for the violence. Then the memory of Sulu's half-dead, bloodied appearance and Spock's pale green-spattered form returned to quell any momentary sense of relief. "A mental force aboard my ship, attacking and killing my people." The Captain spoke aloud. He recalled the hostile entity that had invaded the Enterprise at Beta XIIa, pitting his crew and a group of stranded Klingons against each other. "We must find a way to locate and contain it. I don't suppose your phaser sweep killed it, Lieutenant?"

"I doubt it," Larsen answered pessimistically.

Kirk turned to his Security Chief. "Giotto - I want you and your people to check this lounge from top to bottom. Get equipment down here that will scan every atom in this room. Look for anything that might be similar to objects in the other two locations where attacks occurred." The Captain moved towards the exit, Larsen following stiffly. "There has got to be something that attracts it and some place that it hides."

"Yes, sir." Giotto acknowledged the Captain's instructions and turned to direct his staff. At a nod from him, two of his men, Cougar and Zito, automatically assuming their escort duties, detached themselves from the group and went after Kirk and Larsen.

* * * * *

Spock struggled to return to consciousness but could not find the strength. Something - someone - seemed to be draining his energy, his will, his very life force.

\\...must... I must... wake up... must warn Jim... danger...
DANGER!!!\\

But try as he might the Vulcan could not reach the necessary level of awareness to communicate with his friend and Captain.

As he continued to struggle, a leaden sense of despair took root and grew, a knowledge of utter helplessness. Even if he did return to consciousness and warned his Captain and the other Humans, there would be nothing any of them could do against the invisible entity.

During his brief mental contact with the entity, Spock had felt its overwhelming power and discerned that the entity's intent was to destroy the Enterprise and her crew. It was consuming, assimilating into itself the life-forces and knowledge of those whom it had attacked. Alden and Smith had not died because of internal injuries. The Humans had died because the entity had drained the life from them. Each attack was making the entity stronger, supplying it with the necessary material to achieve its ultimate goal; to become a corporeal being again, to obtain a body of mass and shape.

All too soon the entity would have all it needed and the

Enterprise and crew would be doomed. The weight of this knowledge settled heavily about Spock's soul, slowly but surely pulling the Vulcan closer to death's dark pit.

* * * * *

It took all of the Captain's willpower not to go to Sickbay or to call for an update on the victims of the latest attack. Kirk knew that to do so would only be wasting the medics' valuable time, time best directed towards the patients. Instead, he spent several seconds persuading a reluctant Larsen to go to Sickbay for a check-up and sent Cougar along to make sure she complied. The young woman, an ambitious Human female in a department almost completely filled by men, had a tendency to over-perform. Dropping the two off on Deck 7, he and Zito continued on to the Bridge.

All eyes settled upon them expectantly as Kirk and Zito left the turbolift. The Captain clearly read the question in each set of eyes; *What was the condition of the attacked crewmembers? And who among the crew was the madman, the rapist-killer?*

Moving to the communications station, Kirk asked Lt. Uhura for a ship-wide channel on the intercom.

"This is the Captain. We have an alien intruder aboard. It has just attacked five crewmen.

"All personnel are to be issued hand weapons which are set on heavy stun. The intruder cannot be seen - yet. It is reported to be an invisible mental force of great telekinetic power. Any suspicious activity - unknown lights, feelings, sensations, whatever, are to be reported to Security and the Bridge. Until further notice, the ship is on red alert.

"Kirk out." Turning, he addressed the young man at Spock's station. "Mr. Moore. You are to begin scanning every inch of this ship. Look for differentiation in energy levels - anything out of the ordinary. We must find this creature. Call upon whoever you need to assist you."

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant bent to begin the task.

For a long moment, Kirk could only stare at the slim blond Human standing at Spock's station, doing what the Vulcan would normally be doing. He felt suddenly unnerved; three members of their long-knit Starfleet family - Spock, Sulu and Chekov - lay in Sickbay, possibly dying. His eyes sought out the only other person on the Bridge who shared his long-time association with those missing - Uhura.

Suddenly he could stand it no longer. "Lt. Uhura, you have the con. I'll be in Sickbay." He was in the turbolift and almost away before Zito could follow.

"Captain!" Zito called forcefully. Reluctantly, Kirk waited.

As Zito stepped into the lift, Uhura caught her Captain's glance, their eyes conveying their mutual worry for those three 'family' members. His hazel eyes sent her a silent promise - *I'll let you know as soon as I do.*

The turbolift doors closed and the communications officer rose gracefully from her station and stepped down to the command chair. Her action as well as her presence did much to reassure the other,

newer crew on the Bridge.

* * * * *

The Captain entered Sickbay only to stop abruptly as waves of despair and grief swept through him.

"Bones?" he called hesitantly with just a touch of fear.

Dr. McCoy looked up from studying the form on the bed. The patient was Spock - and he was on full life support.

"Jim - Spock's dying. We've already lost Sulu, Chekov and Kyle." The Chief Surgeon's features were haggard, as if he had aged twenty years in the past hour.

Kirk felt the room tilt about him, his vision blurring, as if his senses were detached from his body. He vaguely perceived a supportive hand on his arm, guiding him to a nearby chair. When he could focus again, it was to find Yo-ma Zito bending over him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm... I'm all right now." The words came automatically, albeit falsely, the leader in him always uncomfortable at any show of weakness in front of a member of his crew.

Straightening, the Captain braced himself for the sight of M'Benga, assisted by several orderlies, preparing the lifeless bodies of Sulu, Chekov and Kyle for removal. After half a minute, he could bear the sight of his lost men no longer. Suppressing a shiver, he looked for McCoy and Spock.

The Chief Surgeon stood over the First Officer's body, grief and self-condemnation reflected in the blue eyes. Putting aside his own pain, the Captain rose shakily to his feet and went to his friends. Reaching them, he laid one hand on McCoy's shoulder, the other on Spock's. The Vulcan's flesh, normally so warm, was icy cold. On the other side of the bed, Chapel sobbed silently, shamelessly.

"Bones..." Kirk tried to speak, to offer comfort, but was interrupted.

"I... I've lost them... lost all of them..." McCoy was mumbling brokenly. "Sulu. Chekov. Kyle. All dead. And Spock... Spock... There's nothing I can do. Absolutely nothing. The injuries... so severe - broken bones, crushed spines, concussions, ruptured internal organs..."

"Enough, Bones. Enough!" Kirk whispered, making it an order. He didn't think he could stand to hear any more. He looked around, searching for M'Benga, knowing that both McCoy and Chapel needed to be relieved of duty, that both were in shock, even as he was...

The grief inside him was like a lead weight, pulling him down into a dark pit of despair. Desperately, the leader in him fought against surrendering to it.

I am the Captain. I must not falter. I must be strong. "Dr. M'Benga, can you take over here? I want Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel to go off duty - "

"No." McCoy and Chapel refused in unison.

The Captain looked into the face of each and knew that neither would leave Spock until the very end. "Dr. M'Benga, see to the rest of the Sickbay duties," he amended.

"Yes, sir," the dark-skinned African said, understanding and more than willing to help.

"I'm staying too," Kirk informed the two, but even as he spoke the intercom whistled and Uhura's voice summoned him to the Bridge. With weary resignation he answered, "What is the situation, Lieutenant?"

"There is a ship approaching us. Unidentified, design unknown to our computer records. And there has been no response to our hailing."

Kirk sighed. It was only to be expected. Just when he needed to be with his friends, duty was calling him to the Bridge. "I'm on my way."

Slowly his right hand fell from McCoy's shoulder, even as the fingers of his left hand gently touched the Vulcan's temple. It was a moment, a gesture, of farewell and sorrow on his part. He and Spock had always wanted to be together at the moment of death, but it was clearly not meant to be.

Setting his shoulders, the Captain of the Enterprise left Sickbay for the Bridge.

* * * * *

Uhura rose from the command chair as Kirk stepped onto the Bridge. One look at his face, the hazel eyes dark with grief, confirmed her worst fears.

"All four?" she asked in a strangled whisper, barely able to believe.

Wordlessly, he nodded. "Spock's still alive, but he's slipping away fast." He moved on to the command chair, emotionally numb to everything but the outward demands of his duty and his responsibilities to ship and crew.

"Status report on the alien ship, Mr. Sulu."

Absolute silence fell and stillness filled the Bridge for two heartbeats.

"Status report, Lt. Rahada," the Captain corrected. Normally he would have sought such information from the Science station, but he had no desire to divert Lt. Moore and the Science department in any way from the task of locating the intruder unless and until necessary.

"The alien ship has stopped, sir." Rahada peered into the little goose-neck viewer at the helm station. "It is just beyond phaser range, but directly in our flight path. There hasn't been any sign of life or hostility."

Kirk turned to Uhura who had resumed her post at the communication station. "Anything?"

"No, sir." Though she spoke in her normal professional voice,

Kirk heard the grief contained therein.

"Give me a full visual on the viewscreen, Mr. Devereaux," Kirk requested of the dark young man sitting at Navigation.

"Aye, sir."

The alien ship's design was unique, although it almost reminded the Humans aboard of a Romulan Bird of Prey - except that this ship's outstretched sides ended in elegant, tapered points. Its forward section seemed to be shaped like a hammerhead shark, while its back section was so long and slender it looked like a serpent's tail.

"Manta ray," someone murmured aloud. It was an apt description.

"Open a channel to that ship, Uhura," Kirk instructed.

Uhura complied. When she turned to nod a 'Go ahead, sir,' Kirk saw that tears were running down her face. Quickly, he looked away, hoping to suppress the urge to focus on his own silent cry of grief.

Spock, my friend. Have you left me yet? Please, God, let there be a miracle somewhere, somehow. Don't take this other half of my soul away! Then he spoke aloud.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise. We are peaceful. Please identify yourself and your purpose in this quadrant."

For a full minute there was no response.

"Captain!" Moore called suddenly from the Science station. "Sensors are picking up great power emanations from the alien ship. It's interfering with all internal efforts to scan. The outflow is of incredible proportions and... Sir, it's focusing on us!"

"Shields up! Evasive manoeuvres!" Kirk ordered urgently.

Personnel moved swiftly to obey but it was already too late. A paralysing force gripped the Enterprise. So abrupt was the sensation of motion that the great ship shuddered in protest, her crew knocked from their seats and stations.

"Tractor beam, Captain!" Rahada yelled by way of identification as she climbed back into her seat.

Others did likewise, albeit sorely, stiffly. The tumble had hurt many.

"Captain!" The Chief Engineer's frantic voice came over the intercom. "The engines are already at critical. Explosion imminent! 39 seconds - 38 - "

In frustration, Kirk ordered, "All systems shut down."

The moment the Enterprise gave up her struggle to be free, the alien tractor beam faded. Straightening, Kirk glared at the image of the alien ship in the viewscreen.

He was about to turn to Uhura, intending to send a message to the other vessel protesting such treatment, when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a tall, slender figure in black and red standing near the life support station.

"Security to the Bridge!" he ordered automatically as he turned to look directly at the figure.

A blinding silver-white light seemed to be between his eyes and the intruder. His efforts to focus upon the stranger failed for several seconds. Then, abruptly, the light disappeared and he could see clearly.

The intruder was a woman.

She was tall; *As tall as Spock, at least*, Kirk judged; and as dark. About her head was a metallic helmet which covered it all except for a long braid of jet black hair coming out of an opening on the lower top of the headpiece. A glass-like tinted visor masked her features, leaving only the lower half of her face in view.

The alien woman wore a simple one-piece jumpsuit of red and black, with silver trimmings running along the side seams. Overlying the jump suit was a shimmering force field of some kind, which conformed perfectly to her very feminine contours.

Looking upon her, the Bridge crew shivered. There was an unmistakeable aura or power about her - power, beauty and death.

She spoke. "James T. Kirk." Her voice, a deep contralto, touched Kirk to the bone. He shuddered.

As if sensing that her speech was causing discomfort, the intruder made adjustments. "James T. Kirk." Her voice was softer, gentler, now, but still it held a hint of terrible power held in leash.

"Who are you?" Kirk managed finally.

Unexpectedly, a smile softened the harshness of her mouth. "A friend."

"Explain," Kirk demanded, not in the least reassured.

"You have an intruder aboard..." Her dark gaze had been scanning the Bridge as if looking for something - or someone. "... an old friend of yours whom I - Where is your Vulcan?" she interrupted herself abruptly, her voice once again jarring with its sharpness and depth.

"Spock?" Kirk was startled. How did this alien woman know about his First Officer.

"Where is he, golden one?" the woman demanded harshly, stepping forward to clasp his arm in a bone-crushing grip.

"How do you know...?" Kirk broke off as a powerful mental force invaded his mind. Shocked, he realised that it was the woman. Desperately he strove to repulse her, to shield his mind. "What... No... Get out!!!" he gasped, fighting with all his will, so much so that he was powerless to move.

By now the Security guards that the Captain had called were on the Bridge. Together with Zito, the three rushed forward to pull Kirk from the woman's grip. Effortlessly, she hurled them aside.

Fearing for their Captain, some of the Bridge personnel attempted to help Security.

"Stop it!" Uhura flung herself against the alien woman. "You're hurting him!" while in her mind grief screamed *We've lost four officers, four friends already! We can't lose our Captain too! I can't take much more of this. None of us can!*

Unable to obtain any information from the Starship Captain without damaging him, the alien woman withdrew from Kirk's mind and turned to the communications officer, focusing on Uhura's verbal and mental outbursts.

"Lost? I see in your mind that you mean 'dead'. Who is dead? The Vulcan?"

Numbly, Uhura nodded.

"Zhak!" the intruder cursed, releasing the paralysed Kirk to Uhura's protective embrace. "Where is the body? Sickbay?"

Struggling to support the Captain to the command chair, Uhura was only half listening. As Zito and Rahada moved warily closer to help her with the Captain, the communications officer murmured absently, "A body? Whose?"

"The Vulcan's, female! Where is it?"

"His body is in Sickbay," Uhura answered finally, her hands gently cradling Kirk's face. "So, too, are the bodies of my other friends."

All eyes now were on the Captain. Everyone was fearful that he had been harmed, that they might lose him to death like the others. Only the Security guards, who upon recovery from contact with the intruder's body shield, were looking at the woman and drawing their weapons to take aim at here.

Without another word, the intruder vanished from the Bridge.

* * * * *

As Spock felt his life force and will slip away from his physical self, he became more aware of the mental entity's existence as a definite but other dimensional being. The aura reminded him of Sargon... no, of Henoah. And as it had been with that malignant personality, the Vulcan knew that this alien wanted his body, wanted a physical form.

Soon, Spock realised, the entity would achieve its goal and he, First Officer of the Enterprise, would cease to exist, leaving only a physical shell for the alien to inhabit. Already it had examined and rejected the bodies of Alden, Smith, Sulu, Chekov and Kyle, absorbing and keeping only the five Humans' life force, the energy of their will to live and some of their thought patterns.

Even now, Spock could sense the minds of Sulu, Chekov and Kyle, each still intact as individual personalities but dissipating fast. Alden's and Smith's minds were too far assimilated to be discernible any more.

Once, the Vulcan thought he felt the presence of Kirk's mind. The sensation had both shocked and delighted him. It would be wonderful to have Jim with him for company and companionship. But all too soon reality asserted itself, making him realise that togetherness for him and Kirk could never be again, that very soon he

would no longer exist.

Worst of all for the Vulcan was the sudden knowledge that at some future time the entity would come to Jim Kirk wearing the body of Spock, using his memories and feelings for Kirk to seduce the vulnerable, grief-stricken Human into accepting IT as Spock. Jim would only be threatened with absorption if the Captain could not be deceived. For reasons yet unknown, the entity wanted Jim Kirk alive and whole but saw the ship and crew only as a means of creating itself a physical form.

The First Officer groaned. If only there was some way to lock the core-being of himself from the entity, some way to stop this steady absorption of his very soul...

\\Despair not, little brother. You are safe now. All that you are, all that you value, will be returned unto you. Relax and let me rebuild what was.\\

Spock was startled. \\Who? What? How?\\ His mind shot forth question after question, but there was no further response. Nor would he have heard or remembered had the answers been given.

Instead, the Vulcan slipped quickly into a deep healing sleep and began to dream of a silver Starship, its Human Captain with laughing eyes and a warm accepting spirit, as well as a Human Doctor with teasing eyes and a warm, albeit gruff, spirit...

* * * * *

Cautiously, Kirk relaxed the mental barriers that Spock had taught him to exert against any unwanted mental contact. His awareness of his surroundings slowly returned. "Where..."

"Captain! Captain? Are you all right?" Uhura's worried voice came from his right. Blindly, he turned to her.

"Uhura...?"

"Here, sir."

"What happened? The woman..."

"She vanished, sir," one of the Security officers reported. "We tried to stun her but she disappeared. I've alerted Chief Giotto."

Slowly, Kirk regained his mental balance. The technique that he had used had been an extreme one, an almost total shut down of his senses and thought patterns, simulated death. Had he remained any longer in such a state, he would have been unable to recover on his own. In fact, only the Vulcan would have been able to reach him.

Thinking of Spock brought to mind a vague memory. "Sickbay." The Captain reached to activate the intercom. *Had he and Spock really touched minds during his mental flight from the alien woman?*

"Jim?" came McCoy's hoarse voice.

"Bones." Unconsciously, Kirk braced himself for the news he expected to hear. If there had been mental contact, it was probably Spock's way of saying goodbye at the moment of death.

"Jim, there's a woman down here. She's encased the bodies of

Sulu, Chekov, Kyle and Spock in some kind of force field." The Doctor's voice reflected confusion. "We can't touch them or her."

"I'm on my way," Kirk said, rising quickly - almost too quickly. Zito and Uhura reached to steady him.

For a moment he welcomed their support, then firmly pulled away. "Mr. Cougar, contact Chief Giotto. Have him meet us in Sickbay."

"Aye, Captain."

* * * * *

Kirk and the Security personnel hurried into Sickbay, phasers drawn, only to stop in mid-stride and stare in amazement.

The bodies of Spock, Sulu, Chekov and Kyle lay on diagnostic beds encircled by a shimmering field of transparent pastel colours. Standing at the foot of the Vulcan's bed, the alien woman held her arms outstretched as if to embrace the four men.

"What are you doing to them?" Kirk half whispered his demand for an explanation, sensing that whatever she was doing required deep concentration and that it might somehow be of benefit to Spock and the others.

"I am repairing the damage done by my renegade charge," the woman answered without turning.

"What..."

"Jim!" McCoy exclaimed suddenly, pointing at the life indicators above the four.

Impossible as it seemed, the life indicators above each began to rise slowly.

"Spock..." Kirk moved forward, his gaze riveted upon the Vulcan. Before his eyes, the First officers's body began to heal itself, to resume its normal green-tinted colouring, shallow breathing becoming strong and regular.

"Captain, look at the others!" Chapel pointed. "They're all breathing. The physical damage is healing itself!" Joy filled her voice, her blue eyes aglow with hope as she returned her gaze to Spock.

Suddenly afraid that, if they continued to move or speak, the miracle unfolding before them might cease, everyone became quiet and still.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, the woman let her arms drop to her side and took a deep breath. As she did so, the colourful halos about the four officers slowly dissipated. After a moment, the woman turned, the visor sliding upward to reveal dark eyes which focused upon Jim Kirk.

"I have recalled the spirits of these four to their physical bodies and set in motion sufficient corporeal regeneration for your machines to sustain them unto full recovery," she informed him

simply.

The Humans could only stare at her in speechless wonder. Finally, Kirk and McCoy walked past her to go to the Vulcan's bedside. Hesitantly, Kirk stretched forth a hand to lay it gently on Spock's shoulder.

«Jim...» The Vulcan stirred and a fleeting sense of warmth and affection touched the Human's mind.

"Spock," Kirk whispered. The relief and joy that flooded his soul all but overwhelmed him.

Not to be outdone, McCoy and Chapel took a moment simply to touch the living, breathing Vulcan. But shortly thereafter, each moved dutifully to check on the other three of their friends.

"They are each alive and recovering," M'Benga announced exuberantly.

Observing them, the alien woman spent several seconds basking in the emotional outflow of happiness. She had expended a massive amount of energy restoring the four and greatly appreciated the positive reinforcement.

The Captain of the Enterprise pulled his gaze from his friends and focused on her. "Thank you," was his simple verbal response, but she felt the full measure of his gratitude on levels unspoken.

"You are welcome," she said and smiled, an expression she rarely gave to a male.

Forever the medical scientist, McCoy wanted to know, "How did you do this? Three of those men were dead for a full half hour."

"A very complex and involved procedure, Doctor," she answered, "using bio-medical concepts beyond your ability and comprehension at the moment." She saw by his expression that he was more than willing to be taught. "Some day, perhaps," she consoled him.

Contenting himself with resting his hand on the Vulcan's so as not to lose the comforting sensation of reunion, Kirk began to concentrate on the necessities of duty. "I've asked this before, but it needs answering again. Who are you and why are you aboard my ship?"

"As I said before, I come as a friend."

"You have certainly acted the friend," Kirk admitted, tightening his grip on Spock ever so slightly. "I am personally forever grateful to you. But as an officer of Starfleet and Captain of this ship I require a more detailed explanation of your identity and purpose."

"Why?"

Kirk frowned, sensing that the woman was being deliberately evasive. "However grateful I am to you, I want to know what has been happening to my people. Two of my people are still dead, killed almost four weeks ago. A man and a woman. I don't suppose you can restore them to life like you did Spock and the other three?"

"No. Their spirits have long passed the point of being

interested in this sphere. However, if you insist, I will try to call them back." Dark eyes locked pointedly on his, conveying the unmistakable impression that this beautiful mixture of miracle and power was becoming annoyed.

"Thank you, but... I will accept your judgement," Kirk conceded cautiously.

The woman's features showed her surprise. "You begin to please me, James Kirk," she murmured, almost to herself. "For you, I will try the impossible," she announced suddenly.

Fifteen minutes later, the woman came out of her trance-like state, looking tired and frustrated. "I'm sorry. My ward has assimilated their personality patterns into himself. I will have to catch him and force a separation if you wish them back. How long can you keep their bodies alive?"

Kirk glanced at McCoy who shook his head.

"Apparently it is too late," Kirk told her. "Thank you anyway."

She shrugged by way of dismissing the matter and stood watching him.

"You mentioned twice now that the intruder is your 'charge' or 'ward'. Are you in the medical sciences among your people? Is the intruder a patient of yours?" In spite of his gratitude for what she had just given back to him, Kirk's tone held the unmistakable hint of accusation.

Sensing his subliminal hostility, the visitor responded in kind. The warmth in the dark eyes evaporated. "That is correct." Her voice, while quiet, began to regain its deep, bone-jarring quality. Kirk braced himself against it, while others in the room fought the urge to flee from the woman's presence.

Abruptly her annoyance dissipated. "We must talk, Jim Kirk," she announced with surprising gentleness. "Come." Her eyes beckoned him irresistibly to her.

"I am not accustomed to being compelled," the Captain of the Enterprise said with some heat.

The woman's eyes merely shone all the brighter. "Come," she repeated.

"Spock..." He had no desire to leave his unconscious friend.

"He sleeps, and dreams of you, the Doctor, his crewmates and this ship. When he awakes, you will be with him. You have my word, Captain."

Slowly Kirk nodded, reluctantly breaking contact with his First Officer. He wasn't sure if he had decided to trust her or if the compulsion she projected was beyond his power to refuse.

"Bones - stay with Spock."

"I will, Jim," McCoy promised, but it was Christine Chapel who moved to take the hand that Kirk had let go.

The alien woman noted the nurse's action. For a moment their

eyes met. Then the visitor smiled as if in shared understanding. Christine found herself returning it.

A minute later, the Captain and the alien woman left Sickbay, accompanied by three security guards. No-one had any illusion as to what Security could do should the woman intend harm to Kirk, but the three were determined to do whatever they could do to safeguard their Captain.

* * * * *

Now that the soul-numbing grief at the deaths of five crewmen and Spock's expected demise was over, the Captain of the Enterprise set his mind to the task of dealing with his alien visitor.

She was taller than he by a good two inches. Even Spock might have to look up to meet her eyes. The black and red material of her outfit seemed less harsh, less militaristic than it had on the Bridge when first he saw her. Now it looked like a very becoming, form-fitting jumpsuit which displayed her feminine qualities to perfection.

Can she be projecting some sort of hypnotic screen about herself designed to make her irresistibly attractive to me? Kirk wondered. *I wish Spock was here.* The Vulcan was so often able to see through such illusion with little trouble.

She walked quietly beside him, her movements confident, easy, fluid. Her bearing reminded him strongly of a great majestic bird of prey - or a beautifully sculptured feline waking a tightrope between domestication and savagery. He felt this especially about the power which radiated from her.

Who was she?

What was she?

And - most important - *what did she want?*

"I don't even know your name," he realised.

"Names are not freely shared by my people."

"And who might your people be?"

"Mostly we are isolationists."

"Is that the name you call yourselves, or your planetary policy?"

She smiled. "The latter."

"Is that why you wear a helmet and face mask?" Kirk was suddenly curious to see if the woman's features were as beautiful as her body.

"Partly. The helmet and visor are part of my armour, as is every piece of my attire."

"Hmmm." Without thought, Kirk put out a hand to touch the material. In a flash, she caught and held his hand in a grip which he knew could crush Human flesh and bone effortlessly.

He sensed Security's alarm, the guards' reach for weapons.

"No," he ordered, and was obeyed. Then, to her, "You are hurting me." He kept his tone casual.

"Never touch a Warrior unless you are invited to do so." The rumbling anger and power were back in her voice threefold.

"I apologise," Kirk said. "I didn't realise. I... We don't know your customs."

"Yes," she acknowledged after a moment, her voice again gentle. Almost absently, she stared at his hand. Even through the gloves she wore, his flesh touched hers, transmitting the vitality and dynamics of his masculinity to her femininity.

"To know the touch of a man again," she murmured.

Kirk studied her for a long moment, puzzled, curious. "Are there no men in your culture?" All the societies of female warriors that he had ever heard of or encountered had at least two common denominators; few or no men and lesbianism.

What a waste for this woman, never to have a physical relationship with a man, he thought in the way men are accustomed to viewing such matters. What a loss to all mankind never to have an opportunity to enjoy such a beautiful body. Perhaps he could rectify the situation just a little - provided she was willing.

"Men are very rare on my world," she answered his verbal question. "But compared to us, they are very delicate. Like yours, their life-spans are very short, their bodies fragile, their minds so closed, so very structured. When aroused, your natures become aggressive, demanding, arrogant." She sighed, conveying clearly that such traits were somehow undesirable. "Very few of you ever survive a Warrior's mating season." Abruptly, she released his hand.

They continued down the corridor to the briefing room in silence. He paused in the doorway, permitting her to precede him and take a seat. Instructing the guards to remain near the door, Kirk took a seat directly across from her.

For a long moment, they simply looked at each other.

"If you won't tell me your name, will you at least tell me what I can call you?" he asked finally.

"I have so many titles, depending upon the circumstances. For you... I will permit you to call me Zar." She smiled in that disconcerting manner she had and he sensed that he had in some way been honoured. "In truth, it is not a name but, rather, describes what I do."

"Which is?"

"Take command."

Kirk stiffened, sitting straighter in his chair. Suddenly he felt threatened.

"On this ship, I - and I alone - command."

"If my ward has his way, Jim, all you will command is 430

corpses. But calm yourself. I am no threat to your command, your ship or your crew. Normally, you and the other males here would be fair game for my stables. However, I... have other responsibilities right now. It is my fault that you and your crewmates have been so severely traumatised. I must set that right."

"Who is your ward? Or rather, what is he?"

"Once he was as you are," she answered carefully. "He was flesh and blood and very much a man. I found him about three of your years ago on a planet where he had been left for dead. I rescued him, healed him, and took him home to my world."

"For a time, he made a sincere effort to be a part of our society. He was special..." A gentle, faraway look came into her eyes as if she relived pleasant, happier days.

Looking at her, the expression in her eyes, Kirk suddenly felt an unreasoning swell of jealousy towards the faceless male of whom she spoke. With an effort he struggled to keep his mind on the matter at hand.

"Not having been raised in our culture from childhood, as are most of the males on my world, his nature was free, fearless, assertive, teasing." The sparkle in her eyes conveyed that she had found such qualities charming. "Within a year, I had at least a thousand bids for possession - "

"Bids? Possession?" Kirk interrupted. "You buy and sell sentient beings in your culture? You have slavery?"

"Slavery? No, not slavery. At least, not as you think of it. Certainly, in our not-too-distant past, we did have such a social system, and in the worst ways too." An uneasiness seemed to settle upon her at this admission. "Now, however, males are so rare amongst us that their care, well-being, breeding and possession are of top priority." She continued as she returned to the present. "Those thousand bids were for the right to... how do you say it?... to 'court' my ward."

Kirk's eyes widened in amazement. Automatically, his male imagination began to envisage such a situation. If the thousand bidders were as beautiful as Zar...

Sheer paradise!

"Are the women of your world as... I mean, do all the women of your world look like you?" Kirk had considered calling her beautiful to her face, but at the last moment thought better of it. If she was more warrior than woman, odds were that she would look upon such a declaration as an insult.

"You mean, would a male like you find the females of my world attractive, desirable?" She rephrased his question bluntly. "The answer is yes. Sometimes a few of you even continue to think us so even after you've come to know us - albeit not many. Once a male sees us as we really are, desire and lust often turn to fear, hate - even envy."

"Why? What could anyone as beautiful as you do to make a man hate her?" Even as he spoke Kirk realised that his words were a mistake. He braced himself for her response, expecting some kind of rejection.

Instead, Zar only looked oddly at him for a moment. Then she seemed to do a quick inward analysis of herself before resuming her narrative. "My people are... They are power, beauty, perhaps ever perfection to the perceptions of most men. Yet we are a people who will not submit to or be controlled by males in the manner in which males of most races are accustomed to controlling, yes, and dominating their females. There are no weaknesses within us."

She paused, then amended her statement. "No physical weaknesses, that is. Many generations of genetic breeding has seen to that. Yet, by the very nature of your maleness, your cultural and biological heritage, your kind is often compelled to use our emotions to try to control us as women. We are not women, Captain, regardless of appearances. We are Warriors. Forget that fact - and you are dead."

Kirk felt his blood chill with that last statement. Clearly it was a warning.

"You... were explaining the origins of the intruder aboard my ship," he reminded himself and her.

Zar searched his face for a moment. "Yes. I had received a thousand bids for the... the rights to 'court' my ward. In keeping with our recently established social changes, which permit our males to have a say in who may court and eventually mate with them, I asked my ward to select any he might be interested in."

She stopped and for the first time her expression was one of dejection. Her gaze dropped to stare at the desk top.

"And?" Kirk encouraged when almost a full minute had passed.

"He desired only me," Zar said tonelessly.

Kirk could not stop the grin that curved his lips. "For that, I don't think any man could blame him," the Captain admitted.

Zar looked up sharply, her dark eyes searching him again. "Even with full biological shielding, I perceive that you still find me desirable. That is not good."

"We definitely have a difference of opinion there." His words were bold.

At first her eyes raked him with a look of irritation, but after several seconds she relented. "James Kirk, you are as reckless as... as my ward." She sighed. "He did not take my rejection gracefully. He became consumed with anger. Even so, I felt little cause for concern. Emotions are so transitory - they come and go so quickly. Patience, I told myself, would resolve the problem. I have a younger sister, who even now begins to look like me. When fully mature, she will doubtless resemble me as a twin.

"I anticipated giving my ward to her. So thinking, I sent him to my mother's household to live, hoping that he and my sister would become interested in each other."

Zar sighed again, her shoulders slumping with regret. "I forgot that my sister has some severe reservations and misconceptions about males. She wanted no part of my offworld ward. And he, in turn, wanted no part of her. I realised I must reclaim him - but the day before I was to do so, they had a terrible confrontation. Unable to

harm her, he turned his rage upon our brothers."

Zar paused. Looking at her, Kirk knew again the chill of terror-to-the-bone. Her features seemed suddenly transformed into those of a snarling beast.

"It is forbidden to harm a male, especially one of our own breeding and blood. Little sister went crazy, regressing almost to her primal state. Terrified, my ward fled. In his haste and fury, he teleported himself through the cloaking shields which guard our world from outsiders.

"The shields repel all corporeal and energy matter not of the Warrior mindset. I found his body caught within the shield about two miles deep.

"The body was mindless."

"Which may explain why neither his victims nor my ship's instruments can locate him," Kirk deduced. "Only his mind, a mental force, escaped."

"Exactly."

"How do we stop him - capture or kill him?" Kirk realised that he held deep-seated anger towards the intruder for the agony, both physical and emotional, caused to his crew and himself. And that anger needed an outlet. Doubtless the rest of his crew felt the same way.

"We do not." Zar's words shattered whatever hopes the Captain had entertained about personally avenging the abuse done to Spock and the others. "I am the only one able to handle my ward."

For a moment, hazel eyes burned with defiance. "All right, then - find your ward and get him off my ship and away from my people before he attacks and kills someone else. And might I strongly suggest that you see to it that he never returns." Kirk knew that he was speaking harshly to the one being who had acted as the 'saviour' of his crew and ship, but he was suddenly annoyed at this all-powerful, hands-off enchantress who had let her ward get loose in the first place.

Zar rose gracefully to her feet. "Aye, aye, Captain, sir!" She straightened to attention, dark eyes ablaze. She even condescended to salute him. "Leaving now, sir, to carry out your orders. And might I suggest that you make haste to Sickbay. Your Vulcan is beginning to wake up and will be looking for his most precious Human."

She gave him a vicious little smile and disappeared into thin air.

* * * * *

Feeling more than a little guilty at how the briefing with Zar had ended, Kirk nevertheless wasted no time in getting to Sickbay. He arrived just as the Vulcan was being helped back to consciousness by McCoy.

The dark eyes opened and focused upon him.

"JIM!" Spock whispered hoarsely, then make a feeble attempt to

rise, to reach his Captain's side.

"Wait a minute," McCoy objected. "You aren't leaving that bed until I've given you a complete physical." The Doctor's tone was firm, but gentle. He was absolutely delighted to have his old sparring partner back.

Kirk had hesitated at the entrance, simply to look at his friend. *Spock! You look wonderfully alive! Zar, beautiful Zar, how can I possibly thank you?* "Mr. Spock. Welcome back," the Captain said aloud. "It is good to see you alive, healthy and whole again." *I wish I could hold you, hug you... but that is not the way of men. Especially when one is a Starship Captain and the other a Vulcan.*

"Thank you, Captain." Spock's dark eyes shone as if he had heard the unspoken sentiments. "I am grateful to be back, though I am at a loss as to how I managed to get back. The intruder was far too powerful for me to fight. It was like a great vortex, drawing anything that touched it into itself."

Kirk nodded and moved to stand closer to the Vulcan's bedside. The two friends locked gazes for a second and the Human had the oddest feeling that the Vulcan was suppressing an urge to reach out to him, wanting to touch him.

"Well, I've just come from a briefing session with your rescuer. She's the intruder's keeper - or some such arrangement." Deciding to acknowledge the unspoken need, Kirk momentarily rested a hand on Spock's shoulder. The Vulcan visibly relaxed.

"Indeed," Spock commented and tried to sit up, only to be firmly restrained by McCoy and Chapel. Resignedly, the Vulcan settled back, knowing that he was luxuriating in the fuss these Human friends were making over him. It felt so good to be with them again; indeed, it felt good simply to be again.

It was all he could do not to smile at them, and it was a major effort of will not to reach out and touch Kirk's mind. He was feeling most unVulcan, and for the moment at least, he didn't care.

"'Indeed' is not the word to describe her, Spock," Kirk confessed. "You will have to meet her to believe her. I suspect that she does a lot of manipulating of emotions and desires on a subliminal level."

"That may be true, Jim, but she's also one very physically attractive woman. I was quaking in my boots at her presence, but at the same time every hormone in my body was doing overtime," McCoy recalled. "If any woman could get even your blood flowing, Spock, she probably could. - What am I saying? She *did* get your blood flowing! She not only put life back in your body - and it was a complete wreck - she repaired it totally. Yours, Sulu's, Chekov's and Kyle's."

"Fascinating," Spock amended. "This woman - "

"She calls herself Zar," supplied Kirk.

"She must possess remarkable skill and power to have done what you describe. Did she reveal anything about her origins to you, Captain?"

"Only that she is from a matriarchal society where I suspect

that the men are a single step above slavery, if that. At most, they're probably treated like favoured pets."

"With a mistress who looked like her, I think I could learn to appreciate being a 'pet'," McCoy grinned.

"I fear, Dr. McCoy, that your hormones are still in 'overtime'," Spock observed.

McCoy glared at the Vulcan, but directed his next words towards Kirk. "Where is our beautiful miracle-worker now, Jim?"

"Hunting down her ward before he attacks again - I hope." Kirk let the relaxed atmosphere he had been sharing with these friends settle back to normal as he recalled that he had a ship and 429 people anxiously awaiting news about the past hour's events. "How are the others doing, Bones? Have they regained consciousness?"

"No, not yet. But they are all doing fine. They seem to be in a deep healing sleep. I don't want to waken them prematurely." Abruptly, McCoy focused on Spock. "Which leads me to one very pertinent question, Mr. First Officer; did you come out of your healing trance sooner than you were supposed to do?"

As a matter of fact, the Vulcan had done exactly that, so worried had he been for all of them. His joy at being alive had also been a contributing - though lesser - factor. Spock contemplated denial of the fact, but saw in McCoy's expression that such an attempt was useless. He decided to say nothing.

"Just as I thought," the Doctor declared triumphantly. "I want you back in that healing trance until you are completely recovered. And. No. Argument -"

Rebelliously, Spock looked at Kirk.

" - From. Either. Of. You," McCoy ordered.

"I think it might be for the best, Spock," the Captain admitted gently.

"The intruder, Captain, is still free - and you are suspicious of our female benefactor." There was now a very real fear in the Vulcan's soul for his friend's safety should Kirk leave his sight. Aware that such feelings were illogical, he sought to trace the fear to its source, while aloud he said, "Given the situation, surely you have a need for your First Officer?" His tone was as close to a plea as a Vulcan could express and still retain some dignity.

"Yes. I do need him, and very badly. But I need him completely well. Therefore, I'm ordering you to obey Dr. McCoy," the Captain instructed, his tone firm but full of affection. "Scotty and I will take care of any problems that arise. O.K.?"

It was not 'O.K.', but Spock obediently answered, "Yes, Captain," and settled back into the bed.

Kirk's hazel eyes silently conveyed his apologies. Then with one last glance at his friend, and a quick check on Sulu and the others, the Captain left Sickbay for the Bridge.

* * * * *

Upon arrival on the Bridge, Kirk made a general announcement about the recovery of the four officers. Expressions and exclamations of relief and wonder filled the ship. The Captain hoped he wasn't laying his people's fears to rest prematurely, and warned them of that fact, urging them to maintain their alert status and escort duties - for all the good that had done Sulu, Chekov and Kyle - until further notice. Nevertheless, it was good to see the tears which had been hovering in the back of Uhura's brown eyes vanish, joy taking their place.

"Was it that alien woman who brought about this miracle, Captain?" Uhura asked.

"Yes."

The communications officer sighed. "Then she did come to help. I'd hoped that she might, even felt that she would, only... there was such an aura of power and self-sufficiency about her that I feared she lacked compassion and understanding."

For a surprised moment Kirk could only look at her in wonder. Then -

"Why don't you call your relief to come and take over communications while you go and check in person on Spock and the others," he told her, well aware that nothing would bring complete reassurance like seeing the four alive and well in the flesh.

"Thank you, Captain." Uhura smiled. "I think I will do just that."

He returned her smile, gently touched her shoulder, and went to his command chair. Minutes later, he was busy signing reports and checking all sections of the ship. It was a comfort to learn that all crewmembers were accounted for and there were no more reports of any attacks or any strange happenings.

Kirk wondered if Zar had captured her ward yet. And, if she had, if she would let him know via communications or if she would come to him in person. He very much wanted to see her again. He felt he owed her an apology, although he suspected that while in her presence no man could really be sure if the feelings and thoughts he had at the time were his own or due to manipulation on her part.

And - *Why did Zar manipulate me into becoming hostile towards her at the last?* he wondered.

* * * * *

Zar returned immediately to her star-vessel after leaving Captain Kirk.

"At last you return," a serious-faced, dark-haired woman sitting at the control console greeted her. "How was your visit to Starfleet's finest?" She lifted her gaze from a survey of the scanners, and was shocked to see her younger companion drop wearily into the pilot seat. "You look exhausted, Gsazara. What happened?"

"Everything," Gsazara groaned. Reaching up she removed the helmet, revealing a face which more than matched her beautiful body. "Gary is over there. In fact, he has been hiding out on board the Enterprise for about a month now, if what the crew reports is



accurate."

The older woman became very still. "Has he done any damage?" she demanded, putting forth a great mental effort to control her concern for the ship and crew.

"Not much. He attacked and killed six of the ship's personnel," Gsazara reported casually. "One of them was your hybrid friend Spock."

"Great Founding Mothers! No...!" The Elder was beside herself with shock. "No! I... will tear Mitchell limb from limb when I get my hands on him. How dare he! I - "

"Calm yourself, E'mar," Gsazara interjected smoothly. "Your Spock is well on his way to a full recovery by now. The attack was less than twenty four hours old. I had no trouble locating his mind and life-force and returning them to his body. In fact, he has already awakened. He was so concerned for that Human of his that nothing short of a supernova was going to send his spirit to the Otherside."

E'mar took several deep breaths, trying vainly to calm herself, but it was to no avail. "How dare you! Gsazara Z/N, you are the most sadistic, manipulative student that I have ever had to supervise! How dare you let me believe Spock was dead, even for a second!"

"He's only a male, E'mar," Gsazara retorted.

E'mar's eyes darkened with fury. "Just like your precious Joel is 'only a male'," she shot back viciously, broaching a subject any other sane being would have avoided like the plague.

Within seconds, the two women were locked in a snarling, scratching, spitting cat fight.

Joel was - had been - Gsazara's mate, her one true love, the only male ever known who could exert even the least bit of control over her. From the best blood lines in the Sisterhood, his masculine perfection had more than equalled her womanly attributes, creating within her an absolute desire to be as much a woman as she was a Warrior. In addition to his physical beauty, the young male had possessed a remarkable personality and integrity of character. Joel had been kind, patient, generous, loving, self-assertive and fearlessly vulnerable.

Every female on the Homeworld had sought possession of Joel, but his heart had belonged to only one Warrior - Gsazara Z/N, Warrior Queen of the Sisterhood of Zamaria.

Then one day, without warning, explanation or obvious cause, Joel had disappeared.

Every centimetre of the Homeworld and its colonies had been searched for the missing Prince, to no avail. Gsazara had gone berserk. Were it not for the calming influence of her father and brothers, plus several very level-headed close friends and her sister, Zsazara, half the galaxy would have been in ruins in very short order, for Gsazara was the greatest, most powerful Warrior ever born to the Sisterhood. As it was, Gsazara had regained her mental balance and self-control by convincing herself that she and Joel would one day be re-united. But she reacted badly to any mention of

him.

On this occasion, because E'mar was counted as one of Gsazara's closest friends, as well as being the young Queen's mentor, she knew herself to be in little danger of death at the hands of her more powerful and deadly pupil.

And Gsazara was indeed powerful. It had been she who had almost single-handedly taken on and expelled the all-powerful Founding Mothers of Zamaria when they refused to give up their Warrior custom of slaughtering a male after he had served his usefulness as a breeder.

And it was Gsazara who had, after this great cultural upheaval - for the Sisters had hunted, enslaved, used and murdered men for generations without feeling one ounce of guilt - permitted the non-Warrior Sisters, like E'mar, to go out into the galaxy and establish working relationships with male-dominated cultures such as those found in the United Federation of Planets.

With her mate Joel on one side and her mentor E'mar on the other, no-one in the Sisterhood had been really surprised when the Warrior Queen had given the colony Cygnet XIV - whose females had always been less militant - permission to join the Federation, provided no Cygnetian ever revealed the existence and cultural history of the Homeworld, Zamaria.

Not that anyone in the Sisterhood really approved of this alliance, except the Cygnetian Sisters, of course; but it had been out of respect for Gsazara's great powers, force of will and determination to make amends for her hereditary predisposition towards the killing of men that no-one on the Council of Sisters had objected. Instead, most had consented to what they considered an experiment, hoping - and expecting - it to fail.

Reflecting upon all of this even as she fought, E'mar (who was known in Starfleet records as Number One, formerly First Officer of the USS Enterprise under the command of Christopher Pike, and now as a teacher of security procedures on Starbase II) knew that it was impossible for her to remain angry with Gsazara for any period of time. Though the Queen had not spoken aloud, E'mar was aware, by the state of exhaustion her pupil was in, that Gsazara had voluntarily exerted a tremendous amount of psionic energy to restore her mentor's beloved friend Spock.

Abruptly, the two women rolled apart and lay staring at each other, panting from their exertions.

"You heartless bitch!" E'mar muttered fondly.

"I beg to differ, Mentor. I assure you, I have no canine traits in my genetic make-up. I am 75% feline and 25% predatory fowl," Gsazara declared with pride.

"Which explains your maddening ability to be a dove and a cat at the same time. It was very cruel of you to tease me about Spock, but I love you with all my heart for preserving his life. Are you sure he's all right?"

"Of course he is. Have you ever known me to do a shoddy job?"

"No, but... I want to see him."

Gsazara sat up, frowning. "You can't do that, E'mar. This ship is of a design unknown to the Federation; I am equally alien. How could you explain knowing me?"

"I'd think of something." E'mar looked to have her mind made up.

Gsazara studied her mentor for a long moment. "You are really serious about this male's well-being," she realised, though not for the first time.

"I am."

"But he is not blood kin. And surely you do not desire him as a mate."

"He is a friend. A kindred spirit. We shared many experiences aboard the Enterprise, not the least of which was our alienness, our aloneness among Humans."

"As well as loyalty to that Captain you pestered me into persuading the Talosians to take into their closed society," Gsazara recalled. It had been she who set into motion the series of events that had led to the Talosians contacting Spock regarding the possibility of returning a horribly mutilated Captain Pike to Talos so that the Human could live out the rest of his life in a mental illusion of health.

"Yes. Him, too," E'mar admitted.

Gsazara sighed. "Well, your Spock has a new Captain now. One who is very possessive of his command power, the ship and its crew. How pleased do you think he's going to be when he understands just how responsible we are for the deaths of two of his precious shipmates?"

"Two? I thought you said six."

There were six. I had power only to restore four to their bodies."

E'mar swallowed, suppressing a shiver. "Who were they?" she asked quietly.

Gsazara concentrated, calling forth a mental flashback of all the information she had obtained from the mind contacts on the Enterprise.

"There was a Lloyd Aldren, relief navigator and communications officer; and an Andrea Smith, relief transporter technician."

"I knew them both. So did Gary Mitchell."

"Then his attacks may be directed at specific individuals. He may be seeking the minds and bodies of those who have memories of him in his corporeal state."

E'mar frowned in thought. "Gary is trying to rebuild himself physically," she mused.

"Of course!" Gsazara snapped her fingers in realisation. "As we learned from the obsession our Founding Mothers had concerning corporeal self and identity, not all beings of pure energy find such

an existence desirable. The Mothers spent nine centuries trying to create corporeal replacements for their original physical selves."

"I recall very well the Sisterhood's history," E'mar retorted sourly. Like many women not of the original society and bloodlines of the Sisterhood, the Cygnesian woman held a loathing for the Sisterhood's early practice of possessing the inhabited bodies of normal, mortal females and displacing the personality born to that body with a disembodied Sister's mental self. Her lips set. "If Gary's targets are as you say, then Spock is still in danger," she reasoned.

"And his Captain."

E'mar looked sharply at the younger woman. "You are using Spock and the others as bait to draw Gary out of hiding." She slammed a fist onto the console. "I won't have it!"

Gsazara's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Are you commanding me?" she inquired with deceptive mildness. Her dark eyes were beginning to flame.

"Yes, Gsa, I am, because this is important. These men and their descendants are our people's future mates. They are the best breeding stock this galaxy has to offer. We can't afford to let Gary destroy any more of them."

The Warrior Queen was silent for a long moment, remembering the Human Captain, his hazel eyes, the inviting lips, and his very masculine body.

"Gsa?" E'mar sought to recapture her attention.

"I will have to return to the Enterprise."

"I will accompany you."

"No, Mentor. I will not have your Federation alerted to the existence of the Sisterhood and its worlds. Not yet, anyway." Gsazara stood, her tone and manner a command not to be disobeyed. "You will stay here."

E'mar contemplated defiance but wisely decided that she had challenged death enough for one day. "Very well. Go, then. But see that you guard Spock and those whom he values. Also," she added as Gsazara donned her helmet, "keep your hands off Spock's Captain. You're a mated Warrior. Remember that. Besides, you might damage him, and that, Spock would never forgive. Nor I."

A little startled at her mentor's perceptiveness, Gsazara asked, "How did you know that I am attracted to James Kirk?"

"Galactic gossip has it that almost every female is. Besides," she smiled, mischief in her eyes, "he is a most compelling male, even if you're trying to make a conscious effort *not* to like him."

"So is your Spock. He's quite a beauty."

"Then get back to them. Guard them. Find Gary and get him away from them. If necessary, destroy him." E'mar stopped abruptly as she saw how eagerly the Bloodlust returned to the Queen's velvet black eyes.

"Yes, Mentor," Gsazara agreed rather too readily, then quickly caught herself and forced her natural predatory inclinations back into its place of submission and civilised control. "Yes, Mentor," the Queen repeated more benevolently. "But I want you to know that this is the last time I play good Samaritan on your behalf," she muttered, and disappeared from the control room.

E'mar nodded with sad comprehension. Gsazara had condescended to rescue Gary Mitchell and Elizabeth Dehner, both of whom had become esper-enhanced humanoids and left for dead on Delta-Vega, because their loss had caused pain to Jim Kirk. The Queen had reasoned that whatever distressed Kirk would also distress Spock. And since the Vulcan was beloved of E'mar, Gsazara had naturally assumed that the rescue would be pleasing to her mentor.

In fact, Gsa, your reasoning was very thoughtful, E'mar admitted in the solitude of her mind. I only regret that one of your rare acts of selfless compassion has turned out so badly.

Elizabeth had adapted well to the societies of the Sisterhood. Already the former Starfleet psychiatrist held a crucial position in the Council of Warriors, and was destined to play a vital role in Number One's efforts to blend the temperaments of the Sisterhood's female Warriors with those of the Federation males.

Reviving Gary had been a mistake.

* * * * *

Having attended to every duty he owed to his ship and crew, the Captain of the Enterprise returned to Sickbay, intent upon spending all of his off-duty shift with his Vulcan friend.

"He's asleep, Jim," McCoy informed Kirk as together they peeked in on Spock. Chapel sat nearby, busily organising some tapes though her blue eyes glanced often at the First Officer's reclining profile. Not far away, in a separate alcove, the men saw that Uhura was doing much the same thing near Sulu's, Chekov's and Kyle's beds. "So are the others."

"But will they be all right?" The Captain sought reassurance, feeling as if he had slipped from nightmare into fantasyland (dead that lived again?! Impossible. Incredible. Magnificent.). Kirk had acknowledged to the depth of his soul that he was still scared. Events had moved so fast and so mysteriously; his world was out of his control.

Abruptly, he moved closer to stand near the sleeping Spock. "Bones..."

"In light of the fact that all four were dead six hours ago, I'd say they are definitely 'all right' now," McCoy pointed out patiently, not unaware of Kirk's reservations about miracles without strings attached.

"Has Spock spoken since I last saw him?"

"No, Jim. The minute you left, he went back into the healing trance." McCoy reached out to make an adjustment on the panel over the Vulcan's head. "Any sign of our lady benefactor?"

"No. But neither has there been any more sign of the intruder."

"Are you thinking she found him and left?"

"It's very possible. We didn't exactly part company on the best of terms last time we talked."

"You look disappointed." McCoy was watching his Captain closely, reading Kirk's body language. "May I remind you that she radiates a psionic-biological power that influences those around her to act and feel any emotion or mood that suits her. Someone like that is not one to have aboard a Starship, regardless of how beautiful they are."

"Yes. I know. But... I still want to thank her for this." The Captain's eyes were upon the peacefully sleeping form of his First Officer. A spark of deep affection and gratitude stirred in the hazel depths and on impulse Kirk reached out and rested his hand lightly upon Spock's lean shoulder.

Watching him, McCoy grinned. "When he comes out of that healing trance, you, Christine, Uhura and... a few others... are liable to get quite a lecture on Vulcan customs concerning touch."

"Let him lecture," Kirk murmured contentedly.

The two Humans and the sleeping Vulcan shared a moment of perfect harmony.

"I've been told that men rarely have need for the comfort of touch among themselves, or share much depth of feeling towards each other."

A voice - alien yet familiar and feminine - intruded upon the friends' moment.

"Was I misinformed? Or are the three of you exceptions to the rule?"

Kirk and McCoy turned, to find Zar standing in the doorway.

Her eyes met Kirk's and a wicked glint reflected in the dark depths. "Or can it be that the famed Captain of the Enterprise is not as much of a womaniser as galactic gossip would have the universe believe?"

It took Kirk a moment to tune in to exactly what she was saying. He recalled his thoughts about her preferences in matters intimate, and flushed in embarrassment. "So you do read thoughts."

"Sometimes." She smiled.

"I apologise. Your sexual preferences are none of my business. And no; we - Spock, Bones and I - are not 'lovers' in that sense," Kirk clarified.

"What - !?" McCoy and Chapel each turned a different shade of red. Zar laughed at the emotional disturbance she had caused among the Humans.

"I like you," she announced to no-one in particular. "All of you. One day I shall show you how much." She slowly became more serious. "I have been told that it is rare for males in your cultures to touch except in violence or sex. I am pleased to see that you know how to touch in friendship, Captain Kirk. Obviously we

both have misconceptions about the other's culture."

Thoroughly self-conscious, Kirk returned his hands to his sides. As if the loss of that contact disturbed him, Spock stirred fretfully.

"I'm sorry," Zar said. "I forgot that discussion and focus upon such matters as gentleness is embarrassing and 'unmanly'. I will not speak of it again."

Kirk shrugged. "Cultural conditioning. I'm sure you know all about that."

"I do indeed."

Captain and Warrior took a moment to adjust to each other's presence. Zar had lifted the visor in her helmet and Kirk found himself getting lost in the depths of her eyes.

"Any news of your ward?" Kirk made a valiant effort to focus on the issue at hand. "Have you located him and removed him from my ship?"

"No."

So distracted was he by her presence that for a heartbeat her answer did not register. Then -

"What?! He's still loose aboard the Enterprise?" Unconsciously, he moved closer to the sleeping Vulcan, his manner protective.

"My ward will harm no more of your people, Captain. This I swear on my honour as a Warrior."

"And how does your honour stand as a woman?" McCoy murmured, mostly to himself and mostly in defiance of her bio-psionic manipulating. After all, there was the matter of watching his Captain being distracted and seduced into passive acceptance of a deadly situation. *If Spock was awake, he would put an end to it post haste*, he thought.

The Warrior Queen favoured him with a look of mild surprise. "To be honest, Dr. McCoy, I have no idea of how I stand as a woman." Sadness clouded the lovely dark depths for a moment. "I did once, but he was taken from me."

McCoy felt instant remorse for the question. "I'm... sorry. I didn't really mean you to hear that. We have too much to be grateful to you for, for me to be insulting you."

"You have no need to apologise for being a male, Dr. McCoy."

The doctor frowned. He half suspected there was a veiled insult in that comment, but the gentle warmth of her tone made it not worth getting upset about.

"Well, thanks anyway. And in case I haven't told you before - thank you for healing Spock and the others."

She smiled. "You are welcome. However, do not forget that were it not for my carelessness in the first place, my ward would never have come aboard this ship."

"I'm not interested in placing blame," the Captain said. "I just want your ward caught and removed from my ship - permanently."

"That is why I'm here, Captain." Zar became all business. "It has come to my attention that all members of your crew who have served with you since the first year of this five-year mission may be my ward's targets. Could you make arrangements to have all those who have this distinction gather in one place?"

"Yes." But Kirk and the other Humans were looking at her oddly. "Just what factors make you think your ward is after those particular members of my crew?"

Zar was unable to mask either her hesitation or her sudden uneasiness at the question. Finally,

"My mentor, who is more knowledgeable in these matters than I, made the observation." Odd that she did not care to lie to this one.

"Mentors. Wards. Just what kind of society are you from?" McCoy wanted to know.

"A society on the brink of a new life, Doctor. A society doing its best to throw off a lot of very bad habits. But enough questions. I am here and will remain until I capture my ward."

From the expression in her eyes and the set lines of her features, the Humans knew that she meant it.

Chapel, who had remained quiet and in the background to most of the interactions between the Captain, Dr. McCoy and the alien woman, could not help but wonder as to whether or not Zar's declaration meant that she intended to set up residence aboard the Enterprise. The thought did not sit well with the Head Nurse, for Chapel could not help but wonder what type of effect Zar's bio-psionic manipulations would have on Spock.

* * * * *

There were at least sixty crewmembers who met Zar's qualifications as a potential target of her murderous ward, including the Captain.

The potential victims gathered as a group in the large rec room on Deck 20 where they were to stay until the danger was past.

Rec room sofas, mats and survival cots were scattered about the room in various corners. Though he had no intention of using it, Kirk had placed his cot in the area where Spock, Sulu, Chekov and Kyle lay sleeping peacefully. Hovering protectively over the sleepers were McCoy, Chapel, M'Benga and Uhura. All four were determined to remain with their friends in the rec room even though Zar had insisted that none of the four were in danger; nor for that matter were Uhura or Kyle in further danger; they had only been attacked because they had tried to defend Sulu.

"Bones never lets a patient out of his care until they are completely recovered," Kirk told Zar. "So arguing with him is useless. Besides, you and your mentor may have guessed wrong. Or your ward may discern that you would anticipate his targets, and set a trap. He might begin to attack my people at random."

As she listened, Zar was making an inventory of all those

present in the rec room.

"I don't see your Chief Engineer, Mr. Scott," she interrupted. "Where is he?"

Kirk groaned. "Where else? In Engineering, I'll wager. Separating Scotty from his engines is like trying to separate Dr. McCoy from a patient."

"We had best go and get him," Zar said, moving towards the exit. Normally she would simply have teleported to Engineering, but recently the Warrior Queen found herself enjoying the presence of a male walking beside her, especially this male.

Kirk fell into step with her. "You think your ward is going to attack tonight? So far, the attacks have come about two weeks apart."

"You said it yourself, Captain. He may anticipate a trap and change his habits."

Zar and Kirk continued on their way towards the turbolift, and were joined by Security Officers Hope, Cougar, Zito and McCraggins, who formed a protective circle about the two.

* * * * *

As expected, Montgomery Scott was none too pleased at the prospect of leaving his beloved engines for an entire watch. He kept finding things to check, little emergencies that he must supervise. Kirk was on the point of ordering the Chief Engineer to the rec room when he noticed Zar's amusement with Scotty's antics.

"Captain, why don't you and your guards return to the rec room? Your Vulcan is beginning to awaken from his healing sleep again. He will want you near. I will remain with your Mr. Scott until he is ready to join the others," Zar suggested.

"I dinna need ony nursemaid," Scott protested. "Especially one that's a lassie."

"Not to worry, Mr. Scott. I promise not to interfere with your work." Zar moved to stand beside the elder man, favouring him with a charming smile. "In fact, I would be most curious to learn the principles upon which your engines work. My starship's motive power functions upon very different concepts."

"Oh? Does it now?" Scott suddenly looked interested and began to warm to Zar's presence. "And what principles would those be?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I can put them in terms you would comprehend, but let me try." The Warrior Queen slipped her arm though his and together they walked towards one of the monitoring panels.

Watching them depart, Kirk fought to suppress the sense of jealousy and resentment that he suddenly experienced. All of his efforts to touch Zar in any way had all been rudely repulsed! That woman was driving him crazy with her erratic mood shifts and biological manipulations.

"Come on." He turned away abruptly and addressed the Security officers. "Let's get back to the rec room."

A great need to be with Spock and McCoy began to well up in him.

* * * * *

Christine Chapel knelt beside Uhura, who sat beside Sulu. Extending her hand, the Nurse ran a scanner over the sleeping Oriental helmsman.

"How is he doing?" Uhura inquired.

"Just fine. He's sleeping."

"But... He's been sleeping for almost twenty-four hours straight."

"I know." Chapel placed a gentle hand over the Bantu Communications Officer's. "We must remember however that for at least a full hour, he and the others were legally and physically dead. We have no idea exactly what Zar did to bring them back to life."

"Or whether or not he and the others will waken with their minds intact?" Uhura voiced her secret fears. Turning slightly, she stretched a hand out to Chekov who lay not too far from Sulu. Those two were her very best friends. Together, the three of them had had some wonderful and eventful shore leaves.

Please be well. She sent out a silent prayer.

"If Mr. Spock's condition is any indication, I'm sure they will be fine when they awaken." So saying, Chapel glanced over in the Vulcan's direction.

A slender figure, its identity hidden by the shadows of the room's dimmed lights, knelt beside the First Officer. One of the stranger's hands was resting upon the Vulcan's silky hair.

Alarm gripped Chapel.

"Hey! What are you doing?" The Nurse jumped to her feet and hurried towards the two.

The figure looked up but made no effort to flee. Its features remained veiled, but a woman's quiet, level voice issued from it.

"I am from Zar's ship. She is my student. I came to double-check on the healing services which she rendered to these four. I find that she has done an excellent job - as usual." She straightened and rose slowly to her feet, her hand lingering for a moment upon Spock's forehead. "Please forgive the intrusion. I will go now."

"No - wait!" Chapel urged, unexpectedly feeling an empathic kinship with the stranger, but the figure had already vanished.

After a moment, Chapel bent to run the scanner over the Vulcan's body.

Everything was in order.

Chapel sighed her relief, noting to herself that he should be wakening soon. She started to rise, to go to check Kyle, but paused for a moment to study the sleeping First Officer.

Was there ever a man so beautiful to gaze upon? she mused lovingly. From the iridescent dark of his almost blue-black, silky hair and upswept eyebrows, the elegantly tipped ears, to the healthy light green flush of his skin and the lean beauty of his well-muscled body. To her eyes (and to those of - she considered - altogether too many of the other women on board) Spock was sheer perfection.

"Chris?"

Startled out of her thoughts, Nurse Chapel turned to see Uhura smiling across at her.

"I know, Chris. And I understand." The Communication Officer's fingers gently caressed Sulu's dark hair.

Chapel returned the smile. "Thanks, Uhura. You're a good friend."

"Speaking of friends - where is the Captain? Mr. Spock looks like he'll be waking soon."

"Yes. I've been wondering about that too." Chapel looked about, spotted McCoy and M'Benga across the room, rose to her feet and went over to speak with them.

* * * * *

This is nonsense, James Kirk reproved himself as he walked briskly down the corridor towards the turbolift. The only reason he was feeling such a strong desire for Zar was because she was immune to his charm and able to manipulate his moods to suit her whims. *I hate being used. And I hate having someone else in command on my ship!*

But what else was there for him to do? A good commander also knew when he and his people were outclassed and when to run and/or call for help. He should be grateful that the latter option had come to them of her own free will!

But why does she have to be so mysterious? And so omnipotently veiled in power and untouchable femininity?

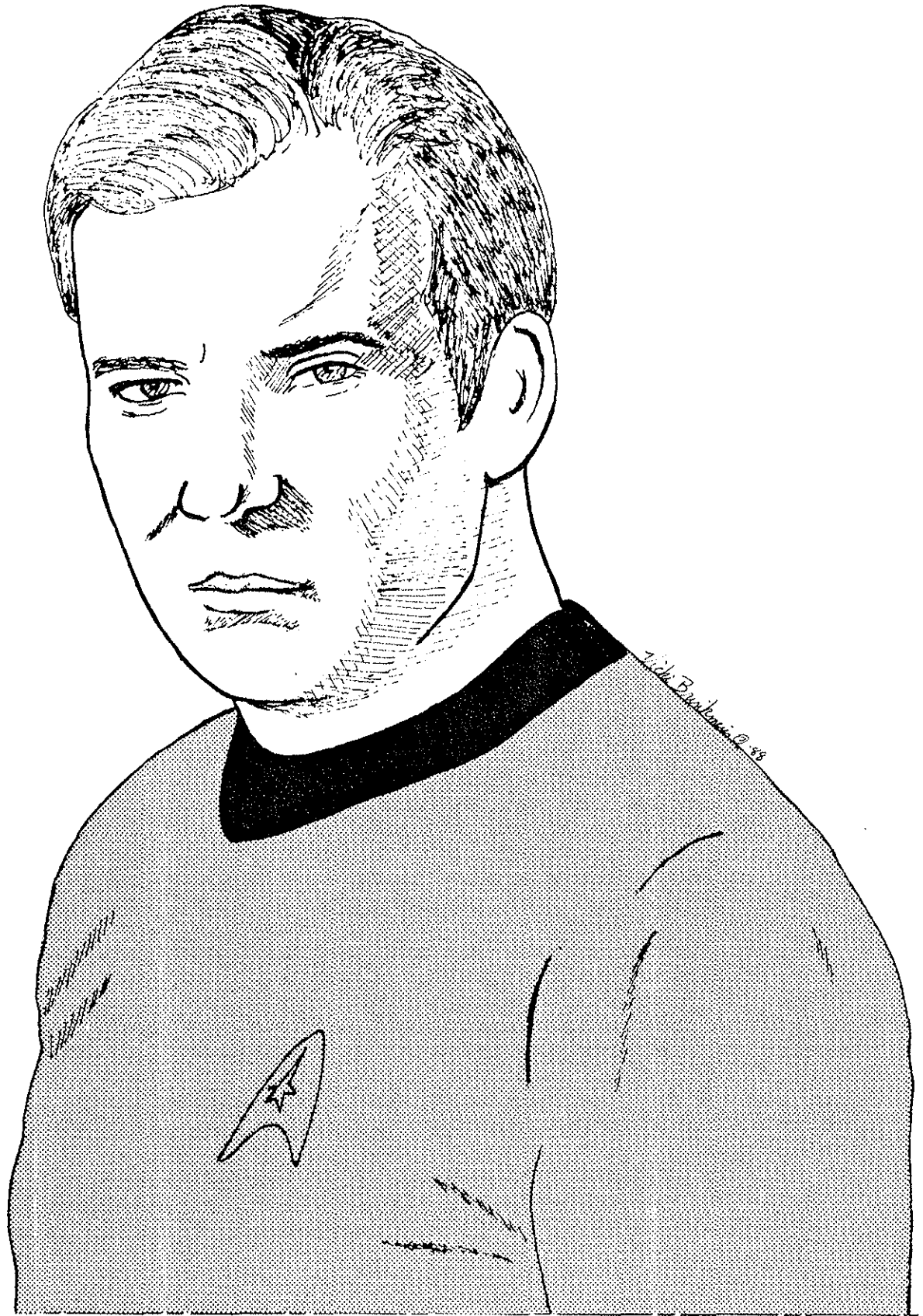
Pre-occupied, the Captain stepped into the turbolift, turned about to find the four Security guards gathering in around him. Annoyed, he almost ordered them to get out, to get lost. But no, he decided; they would come with him to the rec room where he would leave them as extra protection for Spock and the others.

He firmly put aside all subconscious thoughts that he wanted a one-to-one confrontation with Zar's ward in a bid to impress her.

What's wrong with me? Kirk reprimanded himself, realising that his idle thoughts were leading him along dangerous ground totally unbecoming a starship Captain responsible for over four hundred lives.

The turbolift arrived on Deck 20. Its door slid aside and Captain Kirk stepped out. The Security officers made to follow, only to have the turbolift doors snap abruptly shut in their faces, barely missing Lt. Zito.

"Captain!" Lt. Beth McCraggins shouted. She moved quickly to the manual controls, but they refused to respond.



With a sinking feeling, the Security officers realised that they had been deliberately separated from their commanding officer.

* * * * *

Kirk took several steps down the corridor before he sensed something amiss. Glancing around, he saw that he was alone.

For a moment he felt pleased. Then the next instant, a chilling sound like something being quick-frozen surrounded him.

"What..." He whirled round, seeking the source of the sound.

Invisible arms wrapped themselves about him, squeezing the breath out of him. He struggled, gasping for air. His arms, pinned to his sides, strove uselessly to reach his phaser.

Unseen hands circled his throat. Consciousness began to slip away. With a shock, James T. Kirk realised that he was about to die.

\\SPOCK!\\

The Vulcan, his command, his crew, his ship. All would be lost to him for ever.

His last conscious awareness was of an alien mind beginning to pick through his most private thoughts and feelings.

The malignant force paused, considered, then began to wrap itself about the Human's memories of a special, unique, deep friendship with a Vulcan/Human hybrid.

"NO!" Kirk screamed. "Nooooo....."

Even with death so close, the Captain of the Enterprise fought with a strength of will rarely equalled to guard his identity and most valued experiences.

* * * * *

In the rec room, the Vulcan felt his Captain's distress and danger. Alarmed, he was shocked out of the deep healing trance.

"JIM!!!"

The Vulcan sat up, so abruptly that he all but bowled over McCoy, M'Benga and Chapel as they bent over him.

"Spock!" McCoy exclaimed. "Take it easy. The Captain's all right. He's in Engineering with Scotty, Zar and four Security specialists." He attempted to settle the Vulcan back onto the bedding.

"No!" Spock pushed the Humans aside and scrambled to his feet. He crossed the room quickly and ran into the corridor. Rounding the corner leading to the turbolift, he saw Kirk sprawled on the floor.

"Captain!" The Vulcan rushed to his Captain, falling to his knees.

"Captain..." Gathering Kirk into his arms, Spock examined the Human for injuries.

Kirk's uniform was ripped and torn, his body bruised; but what frightened the First Officer most was the feel of emptiness in his Captain's mind.

"Captain, no. Please, no. Don't leave..." Spock pleaded in a desperate whisper. His fingers settled into position on Kirk's face, his mind reaching out to find and embrace the Human's.

For a split second in eternity, the Vulcan felt the intruder's powerful consciousness. It was making a massive effort to hold onto Kirk's mind. Without hesitation, Spock intervened, only to feel the entity seeking to absorb his mind also. The intervention, however, allowed Kirk's mind to rally to the fight.

As always, when united as Spock and Kirk were now, the two proved resistant to their enemy's attack.

And then, abruptly, the intruder ceased his attack and withdrew.

"Vulcan." A woman's voice. "Kirk."

Spock refocused, mentally and visually. After a moment he looked up to see the owner of the voice. By her appearance and the subtle mixture of power and femininity, the First Officer perceived this to be Zar.

"Captain." He pulled his gaze from her to focus upon the man cradled in his arms. "My Captain..."

Zar knelt beside them, placing a gentle, healing hand on Kirk's brow. "He's all right, I think... My ward obviously senses that I am aboard. This attack was less vicious. He is being careful so as not to draw my attention too soon." She removed her hand from the Human and took a moment to study the Vulcan intently. "It is well that the two of you have a deep sense of the other's well-being. Your Captain is a stubborn, over-confident male. Were it not for the bond between you and him, my ward would have taken him."

Silently, the Warrior Queen reprimanded herself for becoming so absorbed with Scott's old-world charm and mannerisms that she had narrowed her awareness. She would have to be more careful. This ship held such a variety of male personalities - many of them unusually pleasant and not overly aggressive - that she was in danger of becoming intoxicated. "Take him back to the rec room and keep him there. I will return to Mr. Scott and escort him to it as well. After that I will accelerate into Huntress mode until I find and subdue my ward."

She disappeared from the corridor just as McCoy, M'Benga and Chapel came from the rec room and the Security guards finally managed to open the turbolift doors.

The seven gathered anxiously around their senior officers.

* * * * *

James Kirk awoke, sore and stiff, and without any clear memories of the night before. But for the moment, such matters did not concern the Captain of the Enterprise. The matter that did was the wonderfully secure experience of having his First Officer and best friend beside him again.

"Spock."

"Captain." It would have been 'Jim', but there were others present.

Kirk also would have reached out to embrace the Vulcan but was mindful of their audience and his friend's dignity.

"Welcome back, Mr. Spock."

"Thank you, Captain. The sentiment is mutual. I trust that you have suffered no serious ill-effects from the attack?"

Kirk frowned. "Attack? Upon me? When?" He looked from Spock to McCoy and the others - M'Benga, Chapel and the guards who were assigned to him, all of whom had moved to Kirk's bed at the first sign of the Captain's imminent waking.

McCoy shrugged. "According to Spock, the intruder attacked you last night in the corridor. He and Zar drove it off before you were harmed. I checked you over when Spock brought you in. You're fine physically." The Doctor looked expectantly at Spock who was studying Kirk intently.

"Captain, with your permission..." the Vulcan began, steepling his fingers in preparation for a mind-touch.

To his own surprise, Kirk felt instant recoil at the thought of mental contact. But no - this was Spock. He had no need to fear.

"Of course, Mr. Spock. Please proceed." He braced himself.

"It will only take a moment, Captain," Spock promised as if sensing his Captain's uneasiness. Though the Human's apprehension hurt deeply, Spock could well understand Kirk's reservations. The intruder's attacks had left his own mind suspicious of mental contact.

* * * * *

"Your Vulcan seeks oneness with his Human," Zar informed E'mar as she began the mental preparations necessary before she could assume Huntress mode.

"Then be ready. Gary will probably interfere. It is clear that he harbours a jealous hatred and envy of the friendship between Spock and Captain Kirk."

Zar nodded. "I am inclined not to fault him on that point," the Warrior Queen admitted.

E'mar looked at her sharply. "Gsa. You are becoming emotionally attached to Jim Kirk."

"Perhaps." Gsazara shrugged. "Or it may simply be the emergence of a sense of responsibility. He was almost destroyed last night - after I swore to him that no harm would befall him. If his Vulcan had not sensed the danger and gone to him..."

"He would be a part of Gary's megalomaniac personality by now."

"Yes." And with that possibility, Gsazara found her mind and body inflamed with rebellion. She had not felt so strongly on a matter concerning a male since... her mate. "I do not wish that to happen, E'mar, ever. It is as you said before the Council; these

Federation males do have a certain flavour, a certain... civilising... influence."

Though she tried, E'mar was not quite successful at keeping a triumphant smile from curving her lips. "There's nothing like a true gentleman to make a Warrior appreciate being a woman," she declared loftily.

Gsazara favoured her mentor with a look of annoyance, but did not contradict the Elder.

"Given that they are much easier to associate with than other male-dominant cultures - think of the Klingons, degenerate, brutal, war-intoxicated - we must never forget that these males have not been bred to the Sisterhood's moral standards." E'mar became serious.

"And how could I, or any Warrior, not be aware of that?" Gsazara's tone was suddenly tinted with distaste, disappointment. "Kirk literally *reeks* of other females with whom he has shared his body. I... hope whatever female ends up with him has either a sharing soul or a blind bio-awareness."

E'mar nodded silent agreement.

Most species and cultures throughout the known galaxy had long ago done away with all the ancient stigma associated with multiple matings by one individual. Perhaps she and the Sisterhood Elders were throwbacks, behind the times in their moral outlook. Yet...

So many destructive elements in their society had been reduced by the Codes of Self-discipline and Control taught to and adhered to by both sexes. Jealousies, betrayals, deceptions, murders, the need for population control, among other social problems common to a society had dropped dramatically.

The Codes, simply put, called upon all beings to choose one mate for life and to involve oneself sexually with no other for as long as that mate lived. In fact, some members of the Sisterhood had gone a step further. They and their offspring, both male and female, were sworn to practice loyalty to a mate even before he or she had been selected. Such a practice seemed untenable at first glance, for it required tremendous self-discipline and control of the most elementary of passions. Yet those who adhered to the disciplines found their personal and family lifestyles to be relatively peaceful and free of strife. Knowing themselves to be endowed with fiercely possessive natures, females and males joined together in life bondings as mates, secure in the knowledge that no youthful indiscretions or promiscuous relationships would ever arise to threaten their emotional/psychological/physical commitment to each other.

"We have our disciplines, Gsa. The Federation cultures have theirs," E'mar reflected tolerantly.

"Discipline? Ha! They have none."

"You're being judgemental, and I suspect it is because you've found one or two of those males to be desirable as mating stock, but ineligible as such by our standards. In spite of their faults, they are nice to be around. You admitted as much just a minute ago."

The Warrior Queen grumbled something unintelligible, but from the faraway look in her dark eyes, E'mar suspected that Gsazara was

thinking about a certain Human male with hazel eyes and light brown, tousled hair.

"Gsa! You are not thinking to violate our moral codes? Such an act is unacceptable even in the name of compassion and/or tolerance."

Gsazara glared at her mentor, her features set in lines of rebellion. "I am Warrior Queen of the Sisterhood. I decide what I will do and will not do - not some code."

"At what price, my Queen? The future of the Sisterhood? You are its leader. You set the example. The faith and stability of your children? You are the mother of two. What you do will determine what attitude-pattern your daughter takes towards your son, her uncles, and her grandfather." E'mar paused, hesitating. Dare she go one step further? Dare she risk enraging Gsazara again on that one topic?

Yes; she must.

"But most of all, what of your mate? What of Joel? He is young, strong, beautiful and pure. No other in the universe has ever known him but you. Should he expect less from you?"

At the mention of her mate, all fight and rebellion left Gsazara. "He is gone from me. Taken. I searched Time and Space - nothing. It is as if he does not exist. Perhaps he never did. Though my soul denies it, I fear he is dead," she confessed miserably, verbalising it for the first time.

E'mar realised that it was her time to be the strong one, to have faith.

"I do not believe that. He could no more die without your knowing it or feeling it than Kirk could without Spock knowing and feeling it. Some bonds are so strong, so powerful and eternal in the making that nothing in all the universe can sever them. Not love, hate, life - or death."

"My dear Mentor, you are such a hopeless romantic sometimes." Gsazara smiled sceptically, but nevertheless felt the steadying, reassuring emotions of hope and determination return to uplift her soul.

The two sat in silence for a long moment.

"You know - except for his involvement with other females, Jim Kirk reminds me of Joel in many ways. He is strong of body, mind... and of spirit; fearless, even in the face of my obvious power and superior strength. And then there is his absolute confidence that his masculinity can tame my Warrior femininity," Gsazara reflected.

"Captain Kirk is capable of many things. But the one thing he is not able to be is a proper mate for you, or for any Warrior of the Sisterhood. Jim Kirk will probably never be loyal to one woman, or able to give total commitment to her," E'mar pointed out. "Loyalty and commitment are, for him, to be given to his duty and his friendships. Gsa, be his friend - but do not try to take him as a lover. You would kill him. This I know. Z/N Warriors do not have sharing souls nor blind bio-awareness."

The Warrior Queen chuckled at having her own words turned back to her. "I hear and obey, Mentor," she said slowly, giving the

respect and obedience that she had always given to E'mar.

* * * * *

The coming together of their minds had always been a unique experience, but *this* mind touch was extraordinarily easy and very satisfying.

«Spock?» The Human's mind voice radiated warmth and wonder.

«Yes, Jim. It is I.» Something was definitely different about this mental contact, Spock realised.

Of all the melds he had ever performed, those he had shared with Jim Kirk had always been the least unsettling, the least taxing, which in itself was extremely odd since his mental pattern and Kirk's were so vastly different. Nevertheless, mind melds with his Captain - even during a life or death situation - often left his hybrid soul with a deep sense of kinship, of love and belonging. Often this realisation frightened him, for it confused his Vulcan half as to how and why this could be so with a Human.

But this meld was even less taxing than usual, even with Kirk.

It seemed that Kirk realised it too. «You must be getting better at these mind touches. I feel very relaxed and content, my friend. Thank you.» There was a pause. «Maybe I should try mind melding instead of sex to relieve my tensions.»

«Jim - please. I would appreciate it if you would keep your hormones under control while I am in mental contact with you,» the Vulcan reproved tactfully. He firmly ignored the deep level apprehensions always present in Kirk at this type of intimacy with another male. In some ways he understood and shared that apprehension. Neither of them was yet mated. Great care had to be taken that they did not become drawn to each other on a level which would destroy their friendship.

Suddenly mindful of Spock's alien biology, Kirk obeyed, apologising. «Sorry. I forget sometimes. What comes so casually for we Humans is often very hard for Vulcans.»

«I am coming to perceive that it is often hard on some Humans, although they make a great pretence of its being otherwise,» Spock conveyed back with a hitherto unvoiced insight.

«It comes with the job, my friend. And so much historical/cultural justification and rationalisation, and simple pleasure, that... Well, who am I to fight it? And this is getting to personal. Let's drop it, O.K.?»

«Agreed.»

«Now, why did you want this meld? To check if I've been injured mentally?»

«Yes. In part.»

A moment's pause. «Well?»

«Your mind appears to be undamaged. It is as strong and healthy as it has ever been.» Spock's relief enfolded the Human in a blanket of warmth and respect.

\\That's good to hear.\\ Kirk reached back with his own blanket of relief and gratitude. \\Spock?\\

\\Yes, Jim?\\

\\I really am glad to have you back, alive and whole. You know, these melds make it easy to say what men can't say aloud to each other.\\

\\Actually, there is a level of mind touch in which no words are necessary. It is all feelings, emotions...\\ Abruptly, Spock stopped.

\\Will there ever come a time when we won't be embarrassed to talk about feelings, my friend?\\ Kirk chuckled.

\\Perhaps.\\

Then, almost before he knew it, Spock made an adjustment to the meld.

There passed several seconds of unspoken thoughts which the other saw as images, feelings, emotions. Mostly they came from the Human, who seemed to have a great need to express himself to the Vulcan. It seemed to consist of Kirk's deep familial bonds; those he had had with his parents and brother. Two of those bonds had been severed by death, leaving a terrible emptiness and loneliness. But in the midst of that empty loneliness, Spock perceived himself as a major counterpoint.

\\I understand, Jim. The... feeling... is mutual. In my culture, it is called 'T'hy'la'.\\ There was also detectable in his Vulcan soul a longing for a sibling.

\\'T'hy'la?\\ Kirk, though not fully grasping its significance, nevertheless sensed a special depth and warmth to the word. \\What does it mean?\\

Spock started to show Kirk all that 't'hy'la' involved, but before he got very far their meld was shattered by a presence radiating hatred, rage and overwhelming power.

With one mind and voice, Vulcan and Human screamed.

* * * * *

"Gsazara!" E'mar gasped suddenly, clutching her head. "Spock. He... and Kirk... under attack by Gary."

For a second, Gsazara looked at her mentor in confusion. Then realisation dawned. "You're linked to that Vulcan!" she exclaimed in stunned surprise, for the mind sciences were not E'mar's strong point.

"Never mind my recklessness. Go to them. Save them!"

Gsazara obeyed. She teleported to the Enterprise's rec room. Upon her arrival, the Warrior Queen found all the occupants in mental turmoil. Terror filled the room as Mitchell ripped through mind after mind, gathering life-energy and mental power to become corporeal again. An actual half-formed physical shape hovered over the writhing bodies of Kirk and Spock. From the unity of their mental bond, Gary had found a focus to draw power from the other

members of the crew who shared the emotional ties that the two felt towards the ship and their friends among the crew.

McCoy, Chapel, Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, Scott, Kyle - all were being devoured.

"Gary! Stop! I forbid this!" Zar thundered.

With a scream of rage and frustration, Mitchell fled from his victims as Zar rushed forward. But this time he did not slip into an other-dimensional hiding place. Balefully, he watched as the Warrior Queen knelt beside Kirk and Spock, touching each man gently.

Once she had been that gentle with him.

After a moment of intense concentration, Zar emitted a sigh of relief and rose to face Mitchell, moving to stand between him and the two he needed to complete his reconstruction.

"Give it up, Gary. I won't let you have them."

"You used to call me M'Chel." He glared at her, missing the term of endearment. "And just what makes you think that you can stop me? There is only one way to stop me, and that is to kill me. But wait." Mitchell assumed an exaggerated pose of thoughtful reflection. "Ah, yes. Members of the Sisterhood are now sworn not to kill men. You decreed the new order yourself, my Queen. Now, what was that punishment for refusal and disobedience? Oh, yes. Expulsion. Hmmm. I wonder just how long the Sisterhood will abide by your policies once you have violated them?"

"I do not have to kill you to stop you, Gary," Zar said quietly. "You forget who and what I am."

"No. That I could never forget, my perfect love. And against such I have taken precautions."

Zar frowned. "What precautions?"

"Your beloved mate Joel. I know who has him. And why," Mitchell declared smoothly.

A shudder went through the Warrior Queen of the Sisterhood.

"By the power of the Founding Mothers, I command you - TELL ME. Where is my Joel? Who has him? WHO?"

Mitchell laughed triumphantly. "Give me Kirk and the hybrid. Then - and only then - will I tell you."

Time seemed to come to an abrupt halt in the room.

"No, Gsazara." E'mar suddenly stood beside the Warrior Queen.

Shrieking his rage and promising vengeance, Mitchell fled, for he knew that E'mar would not hesitate to kill him, regardless of the consequences.

Gsazara turned upon her mentor, dark eyes blazing. "How dare you interfere!"

"Necessary." E'mar stood her ground, well aware that she was only half a breath away from death.

"He has Joel!"

"Impossible. Reclaim your reason, child. There's no way that Gary could shield Joel from your search."

"He said he knew who had Joel," Gsazara persisted, but at least she was talking, E'mar noted gratefully, instead of destroying everything in reach as was the Warrior Queen's normal behaviour when she was so enraged.

"A lie, child. A lie."

"How do you know?" Gsazara screamed her frustration and vanished from the room.

E'mar stood motionless for a long moment, trying to sense Gsazara's location. But the angry Queen had erected impenetrable bio-psionic shields about herself.

Emitting a sigh, E'mar looked about, taking stock of the situation. For the time being, at least, she must act the Starfleet officer, firmly putting aside her Sisterhood obligations to seek out and comfort her young Queen.

Gsazara must learn that leadership entailed not only responsibility and power, but great sacrifices. It was a lesson - and such a bitter one, too - that the Queen must realise and accept on her own, with neither counselling nor cajoling from her mentor. For E'mar knew that Gsazara was destined to continue with the changes she had already made to the very foundation of an entire world - a terribly bitter and aggressive culture.

"If you can't control your own passions, my Queen, how can you command and inspire others to do so?" E'mar murmured, knowing that the answer Gsazara decided upon would shape the future of the galaxy. "Please, my child, let us end the war against men." It was an old prayer, an all but forlorn hope born on Cygnet XIV almost two centuries ago - a hope which now had a chance to become reality, but only if Gsazara could get past her loss, her grief and her rage long enough to focus on the greater good...

Some of the Humans were beginning to come round. Most would be none the worse for Gary's attack; E'mar, augmenting Spock's mental powers with her own, had helped the Vulcan shield his fellow crew mates.

Now she moved to kneel beside Spock. Gently placing her fingers on his temples, E'mar examined her Vulcan brother's mind for injuries. His efforts to protect Kirk and the others had drained him terribly, even with the support she had given. Had she not given of her own strength, he would be dead.

At the realisation, E'mar shivered.

Beside Spock, Kirk groaned and McCoy began to stir. Glancing over at the Humans, E'mar knew that it was time for her to go. With Jim Kirk and Leonard McCoy near him, Spock would be safe and recover without any complications.

"Take care of each other," she whispered to the three.

In a moment, E'mar had left the Enterprise and returned to the Bridge of the Mantaray. Slipping into the co-pilot's seat, E'mar

settled in to await Gsazara's return.

* * * * *

James Kirk and Leonard McCoy remained with Spock in Sickbay until both were sure that the Vulcan was out of danger. Shortly thereafter, Captain and Chief Surgeon faced each other in McCoy's office.

"What happened in that mind meld, Captain?" McCoy demanded without preamble.

Kirk stiffened at the Doctor's accusing tone, but answered honestly, without hesitation.

"I don't know. I can barely remember any of it."

"You've been saying that a lot lately."

"I am not lying, Doctor," Kirk declared, his temper beginning to flare. But inwardly he cursed his inability to recall exactly what had occurred. He had no liking for blank spots in his memory.

"Jim," McCoy began again after a long silence. His tone was gentler now. "I want to run a complete psych-scan on you."

Hazel eyes suddenly fixed upon the Doctor, their depths reflecting anger and fear. "Why? Do you think I did that to Spock?"

"Every possibility needs to be checked, Jim. Spock melded with you for two reasons. First, as your friend, I'm sure he simply wanted to make sure you had suffered no permanent damage from that earlier attack. Secondly, as First Officer it is his duty to help determine the mental health of this ship's Captain; especially when that Captain has just undergone a mental attack by a hostile alien and then claims no memory of the incident."

"I... understand all of that. What's your point?"

McCoy frowned. Was Jim being deliberately obtuse? "The point, Captain, is that you were attacked by an entity seeking a physical form. Spock melds with you to make sure the entity did not succeed - and the next instant everyone in the room finds himself under mental attack. Conclusion..."

"The entity has found a physical host - me." Kirk seemed suddenly to drain of all vitality. He sat heavily in a nearby chair. "You may be right. I do feel strange, and I'm very tired. I may be a danger to my ship and crew."

In spite of his suspicions, McCoy moved to lay a gentle hand of sympathy and understanding on the broad shoulder. "Probably not, Jim. If Spock did find the entity in your mind, I'm sure he moved heaven and earth to force it out. Let me do the psych-scan to be sure."

Taking some comfort from McCoy's words, Kirk nodded his assent, rose, and allowed the Doctor to escort him to a diagnostic table. Contact - either mental or physical - was such an effort for the Vulcan to endure. If his mind had hurt Spock, Jim Kirk wasn't sure if he would ever be able to forgive himself.

Worse; what if, from this experience, Spock came to fear contact

with him?

The thought made the Captain of the Enterprise despair of the future.

* * * * *

Seven hours later, having undergone all of McCoy's tests (which showed him clear of any alien mental patterns), having checked on ship and crew status via Security, and having hovered about the still-unconscious Spock's bedside until he was kicked out by the combined orders of McCoy, M'Benga and Chapel, Captain James T. Kirk sought an hour of seclusion in the ship's pool.

* * * * *

Zar watched the Human as he prepared to go swimming.

Gary... M'Chel... had almost killed this male and his Vulcan. That thought left her cold at the very core of her fiery soul.

Why? she wondered. She was not in the habit of becoming fond of strange males. Was it because she was subconsciously considering this man as a replacement for her lost Joel?

What male could ever replace her Joel?!!

Yet... she had allowed herself to be prevented from trading the lives of this man and his friend for information on Joel's whereabouts...

Well, whatever the reasons or the emotions, Zar realised that her perceptions towards Jim Kirk and all that he valued had changed. No longer would she act just to please E'mar. From this point on she would act to please and protect the Starship Captain.

Shrugging, Zar allowed herself a moment's amusement at the parallel sentiments she and E'mar now shared. Her mentor was just as determined to protect Chris Pike, Spock and all that they loved.

"With two Warriors of the Sisterhood sworn to protect you, Enterprise and crew, you will from this day forth undergo a charmed existence," Zar murmured by way of prophesy.

She watched the Terran Captain for a moment longer. In a few seconds she would go to him and put his mind at rest. Captain, crew and ship were safe - until Gary decided to attack again. Or some other hostile entity set its sights upon ship and/or crew. Such an attack could come next week, next year, maybe never.

Some way of keeping a constant vigil on starship and crew must be found. Should she commit the next eight or so decades of her life to Jim Kirk? And if she did, how would she avoid the temptation of taking him as mate? The self-disciplines of the Sisterhood were exacting and built great patience and restraint, but spending so long a time near James T. Kirk without surrendering to his compelling masculinity would be the ultimate of accomplishments - or sheer insanity.

Silently, Zar concluded that it would be the latter.

The Human's body language was beginning to bother her. Alone now, for he had made his Security escort remain outside, Kirk's

emotional aura as he paused to contemplate the depths of the water was one of exhaustion and melancholy.

Zar touched him fleetingly with her mind. Almost immediately she sensed the unconscious Vulcan in Sickbay stir in agitation.

Quickly, she withdrew.

E'mar was right. These two were truly soul-twins. Unlike, yet alike. Each male possessed a strong bond of loyalty to the other, of the kind she had always believed was found only among the Sisterhood.

* * * * *

Kirk stiffened in surprise when he perceived her presence. Instantly, he put on the mantle of command and confidence.

"It is reckless to dismiss your guards and walk about alone, Jim Kirk," she reproved him gently, moving towards him.

Mixed emotions warred in him at the sight of her. "You lied."

"I know. It was not deliberate - and I am sorry."

"Your ward attacked me twice, and my First Officer and the others in the rec room last night. Where were you?"

"There. I came. It was I who drove him away."

"Not before he put Spock back in a coma."

"I said I was sorry. And your Vulcan will be all right. He is none the worse from the experience." In fact, after contact and augmentation by her mind and E'mar's, the young hybrid's mental skills would improve significantly as time went on.

"I'm glad to hear it." There was a touch of sarcasm in his voice. After a moment, the hazel eyes returned their gaze to the water.

"It distresses you greatly when he is hurt," she observed.

"He is my friend," the Human replied without hesitation. Then, as if recalling who he was and his greater responsibilities, he amended, "I am the Captain. The safety of each member of my crew concerns me deeply."

Yes... the 'Greater Good'. It was a difficult concept for a Warrior Queen who was predisposed towards being selfish. Aloud, she said, "It frustrates one such as you to know that all which you value can be threatened by an enemy from whom you cannot protect them."

Absently, Kirk nodded in agreement. "A feeling with which you have no personal experience, I'd wager."

Was there envy in his tone?

"And most especially an enemy from whom only an alien, a female, can protect them - and you." Zar was not averse to rubbing in her superiority.

The hazel eyes glared at her, causing her to feel instant regret.

"I'm sorry. I..." She stopped and began to chuckle.

He stared at her, puzzled. "What's so amusing?"

"Me. Three 'sorries' out of my mouth in less than a minute. I've not said that many before in my entire life. James Kirk, you do affect me in the oddest ways."

That comment seemed to please him. "Do I now?" He smiled, a thoughtful, calculating expression stirring in his eyes.

"Yes, you do," she confirmed, looking into those hazel eyes. Common sense told her to end this conversation and go; but her common sense was obviously on holiday around this man.

"Tell me something, Zar."

"If I can."

"How can I get you to remove that helmet? I think I may go mad if I don't find out what you look like."

"And what if I'm ugly?" She laughed. "After all, I am a Warrior, and warriors often bear many marks and scars of battle."

"I doubt that. Cosmetic surgery is a refined art in the Federation. Your culture, whatever else it is, is obviously superior to ours in some respects. And if it has women with power and leadership on the scale you demonstrated, I strongly suspect that the cosmetic art is highly refined where you come from."

"Are you accusing the female gender of being insufferably vain?" she asked, amused. Had any other male made such a generalised, stereotyped remark, Zar would have cut out his tongue with the casualness in which most Humans step on an insect.

"Absolutely."

Zar laughed. "James Kirk, you do live dangerously."

"I know." An idea suddenly came to him. "Is that outfit waterproof? Can you swim in it?"

"Of course."

"Good. I'll race you to the end of the pool and back." He dived in and set off with powerful strokes.

Zar watched him for half a minute before diving in after him. Of course she could overtake and outdistance him in seconds. However, she did not. Instead, she went under water as she neared the Human.

Swimming a little to the right, she contented herself with watching the smooth, fluid movements of his muscular body.

* * * * *

Some time later, Kirk and Zar pulled themselves out of the pool

"I win," the Captain announced, grinning, then added, "with your indulgence, no doubt."

Zar laughed, picked up a nearby towel and draped it about him.

"I'd love to see you out of that jumpsuit." He reached out to place his hand on her shoulder. His fingers toyed with the leather material about her neck.

For a moment she held perfectly still, allowing his touch. He leaned forward to kiss her mouth.

Abruptly she pulled away, and stood. Feeling rebuffed, he followed suit, slowly.

"You are wet," she observed irrelevantly.

"Well, of course. We - " He stopped, noticing that she was perfectly dry. "How...? All right. Give me a moment. I'll shower, dry, get dressed. Then we can go to my cabin."

"Can you not do all of that in your cabin?"

"Yes, but I don't want to walk through the corridors of my ship like this..."

"No problem. Let us go."

Before another word could be said, Kirk found himself standing in the middle of his cabin with Zar before him.

"You don't waste time, lady, do you?" he grinned. Inclining his head towards the bathroom, he invited, "Join me?"

Zar considered. "No. I will wait for you in here."

Disappointment marred his handsome features. Turning, he walked into the bathroom.

Again Zar found herself watching every movement of his athletic body. Without warning, the ancient passions awoke, setting her mind and blood aflame with desire - and murder.

Using the memory of Joel, the Warrior Queen quickly drove the passions away, knowing that she had been a fool to think that she could defy her most basic instincts towards a male not bred and trained to mate with her.

Kirk peeked out of the bathroom for a moment. "I hope when I come out I'll find you in something other than that jumpsuit and helmet," he informed her, hazel eyes alight with anticipation.

Zar took a breath. "As you wish," she answered formally. "Also, when you return, I have something to tell you."

His hazel eyes lit with renewed hope. Flashing her a mischievous grin, he slipped his head back into the bathroom.

When she was sure that he was completely occupied in the sonic shower, Zar removed her helmet and let her long hair cascade about her face, over her shoulders and down her back to the waist. Its length had always been impractical from a Warrior's point of view, but Joel loved it so she had never cut it.

A brief glance at her jumpsuit transformed the outfit into a shimmering, flowing white gown with an elegant red and black leather

belt-sash.

Having prepared herself, Zar looked about the cabin, contemplating its preparation. She had never been good at romantic scenarios...

* * * * *

James Kirk emerged from the bathroom to find a candle-lit table for two laid out and the most beautiful woman in the universe standing beside it.

"Zar." He breathed her name. Unconsciously, his hands gathered his short white robe about himself. His eyes drank in the sight of her, every line, every contour - and acknowledged his unworthiness even to be in the same room with her.

Recognising that look, Zar sought to put him at his ease. "My personal name is Gsazara. Share it with no other except your Vulcan and the Doctor."

Sensing the great honour which she bestowed upon him, Kirk stood silently for a long minute, simply worshipping the sight of her.

"I can understand your ward's obsession with you," he confessed finally, walking slowly towards her.

"It's the bio-genetic engineering," Zar informed him by way of a disclaimer. "What better way to draw one's prey than to be all it finds desirable?"

Ignoring what was also intended as a warning, Kirk moved to take her in his arms, but Zar stepped back and inclined her head towards the table. "Dinner is ready. I prepared it myself. I... hope you like it." She smiled uncertainly, hopefully. Cooking wasn't her strong point - that had been Joel's speciality; however, he had taught her how to prepare a few dishes, and she sometimes gave it a try - when the 'incentive' was attractive enough.

"I'm sure I will like it just fine." Kirk forced his mind away from the physical and looked at the table. Abruptly, he became aware of his state of undress. "Ah - excuse me while I find something more appropriate to put on for dinner." Obviously Zar required a longer period of courting. He would oblige.

"I'll be waiting," Zar smiled.

* * * * *

Dinner was an extremely pleasant, quiet affair between them.

The two spoke of many things during the course of their conversation; life in their respective cultures, their dreams hopes and ambitions. Finally, however, Zar gave him the news that put his mind and soul at rest.

"My ward has fled your ship. You and your crew are safe now." She watched as quiet relief and joy filled him.

"Thank you," he said simply, somehow knowing that this time there would be no more surprise attacks by the intruder. He took a moment to look at her, to breath deeply of his relief and her beauty. "Words cannot adequately express my gratitude... Gsazara."

He reached across the table and clasped her hand. "In my culture there is a saying - 'Actions speak louder than words'." Rising, he moved around the table without releasing her hand. "Come?" he invited, nodding towards the sleeping alcove.

Zar allowed him to lift her to her feet. "James..."

Abruptly he put his arms around her. "Enough talk," he whispered urgently, tightening his grip.

For a moment, Zar stood frozen within the circle of his arms. Then as if possessed of a will of their own, her arms slipped about him, holding him close. Kirk began kissing her neck.

"James. Stop. You must stop this. You must not make me want you," she warned.

"But... I want you to want me," he murmured against her skin. "To want me as much as I want you," he urged passionately.

"James - I am not like other women. My customs are different. What you desire of me is an abomination unless sanctioned by the marriage bond. And even then, unless done with care, it could end in your death."

But the Human had only listened to the first sentence. "Yes. You are like no other woman I've ever known. You are perfection. You are..."

"I am Death," she whispered into his ear, the tonal quality of her voice so intense that it caught his attention, shaking him to the bone. He pulled away from her slightly, lifting his head to look into her face.

"If by some miracle I did not kill you upon our joining, your life as you know it - and want it - would be ended. Once I made you mine, I would want you with me forever." She took his face between her hands. "Would you be willing to give up your life as a starship Captain to join me on a world ruled by Warrior women, James Kirk?"

Kirk felt his passion for Zar drain away. He could not speak, but she - and he - knew his answer.

"I'll take my chances!" Kirk said suddenly, fiercely, defiantly, and tried to pull her back against him again.

But Zar had had enough. Firmly she put him away from her.

"I must go now. My ward seeks other prey. I must overtake him before he attacks others."

"Go? You are just going to leave?" Kirk's voice held disbelief and sudden anger. "You lead me on. Stir my passion with your presence and beauty, then think to go without giving me any relief?"

Zar's expression softened with compassion. "Yes. I am being cruel. It is... an old reflex of mine. Forgive me." She reached to pull him to her, and sensed his hopes rising. *Foolish, over-confident male. Do you really think yourself my equal? Or that my words exaggerate the truth?*

Kirk came willingly, eagerly, into her embrace. Her mouth found his, kissing him to the depths of his soul. It seemed so fragile,

fluttering like a captured bird in her embrace! *Gently, gently!* she warned herself. But her body was not be denied this one instant of pleasure after such a lengthy abstinence.

So urgent was her need, so great her mental and physical presence, the Warrior Queen literally took the Human's breath away. When finally she released him, James Kirk lay limp in her arms.

Zar took a moment more to look down into his face, memorizing every line and contour.

Then she became aware of E'mar's frantic mental call in her mind.

\\Gsazara! What have you done? Spock has just awakened. He is crazy with fear. His mental bond to Kirk has been jarred.\\

\\Calm down, Mentor. Your Spock's Human will be all right. I merely had to remove a few of his memories.\\

\\Gsazara Z/N! How dare you tamper with a male's mind! Especially that male!\\

\\How dare he try to seduce me!\\ she countered haughtily.

\\Youngling - put that male down this instant and get out of there. Spock is on his way - and I... I'm sure he has violence on his mind.\\

Gently, Zar brushed Kirk's lips with her fingers, not blaming the Vulcan for his possessiveness toward this man one bit.

\\Yes, Mentor. I'm on my way.\\

Gathering Kirk closer, Zar carried him to the sleeping alcove and laid him upon the coverlet. "Goodbye, my little tempter. Adultery never looked as good as you." She kissed him again, quickly this time for already she sensed the Vulcan at the door.

\\Gsazara Z/N!\\

Mentors. They could be such nags!

* * * * *

Fearing the worst, Spock burst into his Captain's cabin to find Kirk unconscious in the sleeping alcove.

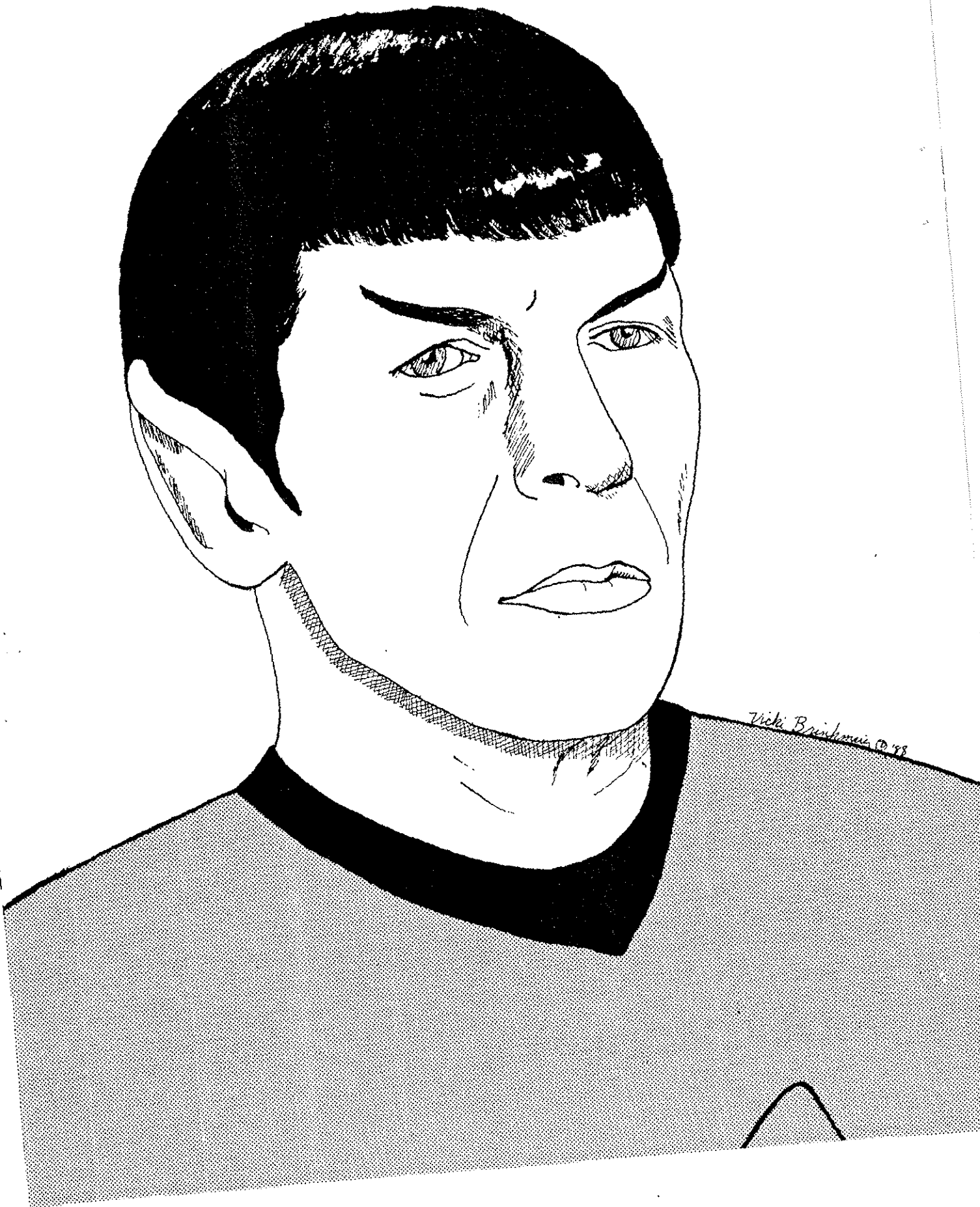
"Captain!" The First Officer rushed forward. "Jim!"

Long fingers settled quickly onto the vital nerve points leading to the mind and personality he loved so well.

Moments later, Jim Kirk opened his eyes to look up into his First Officer's face.

"Spock. You're awake. Thank God." The Human smiled, his relief and joy touching the Vulcan deeply. But then the smile lessened somewhat as the hazel eyes took in their surroundings. "What... Wait a minute!" Kirk sat up, taking a good look around him. "What am I doing in my cabin? How did I get here?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "I had hoped you would be



able to answer that question. Security reported your last known location as the swimming pool," he told the Human levelly. Had that last attack damaged Kirk's mind in some way? This was the third incident that his Captain claimed to have no memory of.

"The pool... Yes - I was... I..." Kirk faltered for a moment as a fleeting memory returned. "Zar!"

Spock's features took on a guarded, wary look. "The alien woman?"

Kirk paused, looking at his Vulcan friend, tuning in to Spock's sudden unease. "Yes. She came to me at the pool. The intruder has left the ship. We are safe now," he said simply.

Spock took a breath. "And the woman?"

"Zar has gone in pursuit of him to stop him before he attacks anyone else."

The Human swung his legs to the floor and the Vulcan moved to sit beside him. "I hope one day to meet her again, in more peaceful circumstances of course. I would very much like to see that Warrior as a woman," he commented conversationally.

Looking at him, Spock allowed himself a moment's indulgence of old sentiments; whatever the situation, no matter the crisis, his Captain always seemed to find a moment for his favourite pastime - women. As always, Spock thought it most illogical. But such were the ways of Humans, especially this Human whom he called Friend and thought of as Brother. Therefore he was more than willing to tolerate all Kirk's emotional aberrations.

"You've got that long-suffering look on your face again, Spock," Kirk grinned.

"Indeed." The Vulcan sighed. "From what I saw of the woman, I can understand your personal interest. However, I have some concern as to what she - and her ward - may have been doing to you during my incapacitation."

"Spock! You are my First Officer and my friend - you're not my mother!" Kirk reproved fondly.

But the Vulcan was in no mood to be distracted from the matter at hand. "I am well aware of my relationship to you, Captain. And of my responsibilities!" He returned the level of the conversation to duty.

"Yes, Commander." Kirk took the reproof good-naturedly.

"There is the matter of your lapses in memory, sir," Spock reminded.

"Oh. Yes." This time the Captain did put aside all romantic notions of the alien woman. "What do you suggest?"

"With your permission, I wish to finish what we started in the rec room."

Kirk's hazel eyes lit with suspicion - and then amusement. "Do you, now?" he murmured, secretly relieved that Spock was showing no sign of hesitation at the prospect of another mind meld with him.

"Then - by all means, Mr. Spock. Proceed, please."

Long Vulcan fingers reached to touch Human temples. And - for a time, at least - all was peace and harmony aboard the Enterprise.

* * * * *

"Isn't that sweet."

"Cut the sarcasm, youngling. It isn't often that two people find that degree of companionship together."

"I know. I'm just a little jealous."

"Why? You have K'Lynn."

"Yes, but she's so..."

"Vulcan?"

"K'Lynn would scratch your eyes out if she heard you refer to her in that way."

"I'll make it a point never to mention it when she's around."

"... Mentor?"

"Yes?"

"We must find a way to keep those two safe. M'Chel will try again to harm or destroy them."

"I know."

"Any suggestions?"

"One."

"What is it?"

"Your sister."

"What? Zsa?"

"As babysitter and all around bodyguard. She's very good at both. Best of all, she doesn't get romantically involved with her charges."

"She's just a youngling."

"As are you."

"I am Queen."

"Zsa is your sister, partaker of your heritage and powers. And she knows M'Chel, how to handle him."

"Handle him? Ha! New laws or not, if she ever gets her hands on him she'll kill him!"

"Exactly."

"Mentor, may I remind you that you are a pacifist?"

"No. I'm a peacemaker. There's a difference. Give me Zsazara, my Queen. As you say, she is young and already in training to co-exist with males of the Federation. And she's in much better control of her glands than you are these days."

"I stand reproved, Mentor. I will consider your suggestion."

"Thank you. That is all I ask, my Queen. Except..."

"What?"

"Can we stop at Talos? I want to visit Christopher Pike."

"Now whose glands are playing up?"

"He's a friend and my Captain. No more."

"Tell *that* to Vina!"

